



As
Dog
is my
WITNESS

Jeffrey
Cohen

Another
**Aaron
Tucker**
Mystery

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**To Evie, my favorite girl, who more
than anyone I know, deserves to
have a book dedicated to her**

PROLOGUE

Damn, it was cold!

If this was what December felt like, Michael Huston was not happily looking forward to February. Still, he thought, zipping up his coat just a little higher, there were worse things than walking your dog, even on a freezing night like this one.

The dog, a Dalmatian named (appropriately enough) Dalma, was taking her sweet time doing what walks are for, so Michael steered her toward what was her favorite spot, in front of the house that belonged to Tom Molinari, North Brunswick, New Jersey's mayor. Through Thinsulate gloves, Michael fingered the plastic bag he'd bought at Shop Rite for pooper-scooper use.

Michael hadn't wanted a dog, but now he found he liked the quiet time spent every evening with Dalma—it not only led to some inspired thinking, but heightened his senses. Noticing a strange sound coming from the green house on the corner, winter and summer, he tried to determine what it might be (it turned out to be the motor for a fish tank aerator). He enjoyed making up stories about the strangers who walked by with their own dogs, and wondering how close he might be to the truth. He even liked the act of cleaning up after Dalma because it made him feel like a responsible citizen: there's some poop that won't be left on the street!

Tonight, however, he was in a hurry, and it wasn't just because of the cold. His wife, Karen, had made a point of kissing him twice before he left with the dog tonight, and he knew what that meant. It would be good to get home quickly.

In seven years of marriage, Karen and Michael (and he always gave her top billing) had established a very strong unspoken understanding—they knew each other so well they didn't finish each other's sentences so much as each other's thoughts—and two kisses placed on the lower lip clearly meant "come back soon—I'll be waiting for you."

Come on, dog!

Michael, anticipating a night most men only dream about, thought a lot about his marriage—something most men rarely do. The majority of

married couples, he believed, were on autopilot after the first year. They stayed married because it never occurred to them not to stay married, but they certainly didn't put the time and thought into the relationship that couples like Karen & Michael (he also thought of them with an ampersand between their names, like a corporation's logo) clearly did, and that was what put them in the rarefied company of People Whose Marriages Were Still Love Affairs.

Dalma took her sweet time (she knew that once she was done, it would be a quick sprint back to the house, and her crate for the night), but eventually, the lure of Mayor Molinari's lawn, with all its fond memories and aromas, was too much to resist, and she assumed the position.

Michael felt for the plastic bag in his pocket, and took it out, inverting it so the Shop Rite logo would be on the outside when he was done with his task. Most people didn't care about such details, but he did. He wasn't sure why.

Having completed the clean-up, Michael steered the dog back in the direction of home. Because his marriage was the central point in his life, the thing around which everything else revolved, the upcoming night of passion with a woman he'd known—and slept with—for nine years was an all-consuming thought. He barely noticed the patch of ice in front of Mr. Indik's house, but managed to avoid slipping on it at the last second. Come on, Dalma, we're only two blocks away!

He was so lost in the reverie of anticipation that he hardly noticed the man in the brown parka approaching him. Otherwise, Michael would have seen the big, hooded, fur-lined coat like the one Elliot Gould wore in the movie M*A*S*H. In other circumstances, he would have seen the hood obscuring the man's face.

And in all likelihood, Michael would have seen the strange-looking antique pistol in the man's right hand. Not that it would have done him much good.

Michael's last thought was: "How can that guy go out on a night like tonight without gloves?"

Contents

[Part One — Friends](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

Part Two — Family

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Six

EPILOGUE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Part One

FRIENDS

Chapter One



“Does it *have* to be New Jersey?” Glenn Waterman, tan, tall, flaxen-haired, and handsome—damn him!—was leaning back in his leather chair, resisting the impulse to put his feet up on his enormous modern desk, the one with the state-of-the-art flat screen computer monitor on it. For the sake of our conversation, he had removed the telemarketer-style headset from his ear, but he kept glancing at it, like a dog commanded to stay with a piece of red meat just barely out of reach.

“Yes,” I said patiently. “It has to be New Jersey. I wrote the script about New Jersey because I know New Jersey. In fact, I think New Jersey pretty much becomes a character in the script. If you move it to, say, Oregon, it’s not going to make sense that people act or talk that way.”

Glenn had summoned me to Los Angeles, as far off my normal turf as you can get without leaving the continent entirely, to discuss the twenty-fifth screenplay I’d written, *The Minivan Rolls For Thee*, a lighthearted murder mystery that . . . well, I’ve told that story already. Trust me, it was necessary for the proposed movie to take place in New Jersey.

Waterman’s company, Beverly Hills Films, was not, in fact, headquartered in Beverly Hills, which makes sense if you’ve ever dealt with anyone in the movie business. It was in Santa Monica, in as nondescript an office building as you could find in Southern California. But his office, in a corner with lots of windows, naturally, was impressive, much as Waterman intended it to be.

If he liked the script, Glenn’s company would purchase what in the movie business is called an “option,” which is something akin to a rental agreement. The production company gets to take the script to studios to beg for money to produce it, and the writer (that’s me) can’t let anyone else do the same for the term of the option agreement. In return, the production

company (that's them) gives the writer (that's me) money. That's the theory, anyway.

Since Waterman had paid my airfare from Newark to L.A. and put me up in a nearby hotel, I figured he had some interest in the script. He was now "giving notes," which means he was telling me everything that was wrong with the script he had told me, almost a month ago on the phone, was "brilliant." Things change quickly in Hollywood. If you've ever been there during an earthquake, you know exactly what I mean.

"I guess," he admitted finally. "Would be cheaper to shoot it in town, though."

"Anybody around here ever heard of the backlot?" I asked.

"They never use the backlot anymore," he said with a sneer. "Movies for The Disney Channel use the backlot. Feature films go on location."

"So go on location to New Jersey," I suggested.

"We usually go to . . . other areas," Glenn said.

"Yeah. Usually to Canada, because films are cheaper to make up there. But I'm willing to bet you can find a part of Alberta that looks just like New Jersey."

He brightened. "I'll bet you're right."

"It's movie magic, Glenn," I told him.

As producers go, Waterman wasn't a bad guy, which is like saying that the shark felt really bad about eating you, but, hey, he was hungry and you were a mackerel. Waterman didn't brutalize his assistant in front of me (I can't vouch for anything that went on outside my presence), always offered me a Diet Coke when I got to his office, and only made me sit in the chair in front of his intimidating desk when someone else was involved in the meeting. Otherwise, I could use the couch, which itself was larger than the living room of my Midland Heights, New Jersey home.

"Aaron, on page 64 . . . Waterman was moving on to another note, and we'd been at this for three straight days.

"Is this a big one, Glenn? I have a plane to catch in . . . I checked my watch dramatically. "An hour and a half." I was lying; my flight was actually in two hours, but I'd heard enough nitpicking already—things that wouldn't make the script one iota better, but would still be changed as evidence of the producer's "brilliant creative input." Besides, I was worried

about making my flight. This was Los Angeles, and driving from the parking lot to the next traffic light could take a half hour.

“Go,” he said. “Go home to your wife and kids. And do the rewrite fast, Aaron. We have to strike while the iron is hot.”

I picked up my canvas bag, and stopped halfway to the door, which meant I was only 50 yards from leaving the office. “The iron is hot? We have a hot iron?”

“I’ve been talking this up, Aaron,” he said, looking hurt. “People know me. They’ll want to know what I thought was so terrific. Make it better, and we’ll have ourselves a deal.”

“If my agent finds out I’m working on the script without an option agreement in place, she’s going to squawk,” I said, knowing full well that my agent, based in Cleveland, would have welcomed any interest in my scripts, even if it came from Hitler Wasn’t Such A Bad Guy Productions, and they wanted me to work for free, forever. Margot was not exactly what you’d call a scorched-earth negotiator.

“Don’t worry. I have confidence in you. You fix it, and you’ll have an option soon.”

Great. He had such confidence that he was sending me on my way to do more work on a screenplay he’d initially loved, and giving me no money to do it. I guess there’s confidence—and then there’s confidence.

I made the flight with a little time to spare, after having convinced the crack Los Angeles International Airport security team that the part-metal object in my pocket was a guitar capo, which it actually was. Unless they thought I could take someone hostage by changing their key, I presented no actual threat. The fact that everything in the security area was labeled “LAX” didn’t inspire overwhelming confidence, but I could only hope they knew more about who was a terrorist and who wasn’t than I did.

I got out my cell phone before the flight attendant made the announcement to turn all electronic devices off, something which still sounds to me like a line from a science fiction movie. I pushed the “1” button and held it for a couple of seconds.

Abigail’s voice, my favorite sound in the world, broke through from 3,000 miles away. “Hello?”

“This is an obscene phone call.” The woman to my left, in her mid-sixties, gave me an involuntary glance.

“Oh, good,” said my wife. “I haven’t had one in hours.”

“We aim to please. I’m on the plane.”

“Thank goodness,” Abby sighed. “I’m tired of being a single parent.”

“How are they?”

“Leah misses you,” she said. “And I’m pretty sure Ethan finally noticed you’re gone. He complained about walking the dog, but didn’t say it was your turn.”

“Well, it’s been four days. He was bound to catch on sometime. Have I gotten any work calls?”

“A couple from the *Star-Ledger* and one from Lydia at *Snapdragon*. She says they don’t have anything now, but she’s not forgetting about you.”

“Neither is Bank of America, and they want their mortgage payments made on time,” I groaned.

“I’m still gainfully employed, Aaron,” my wife reminded me. “We’re not getting thrown out on the street anytime soon. Oh, and you’ve gotten four phone calls from Lori Shery.”

That was odd. “Lori? What’d she say?”

“Just to call her back. She obviously doesn’t know you were away, and I haven’t talked to her. I just heard the messages on the machine.”

“She probably wants a free column for her newsletter, but she usually emails,” I said. It was odd that Lori would call, and four times in a day—I had talked to Abby the day before—meant it was important.” Well, there’s not much I can do from here. I’ll call her when I get home.”

“Which will be soon,” Abby said.

“It’s touching how much you miss me.”

“It’s garbage night, and Ethan can’t lift the cans all by himself.”

“Stop it. Your devotion is getting me aroused.” The woman next to me looked up at the “call flight attendant” button, and seriously considered pressing it.

Abby’s voice turned serious. “I’ll be glad to see you, honey,” she said. “You know that.”

“I miss you guys more than I can tell you in a public place,” I answered. “I hate being away.”

“How’d the meeting go? Did you get the option?”

I wasn’t interested in telling her what a bad negotiator I am.” They’re saying I have to turn off the cell, Abby. I’ll tell you all about it when I get

home.”

“That means no, doesn’t it?”

“See you soon, honey. I love you!” I hung up.
So I’m a bad negotiator, a liar, and a coward.

Chapter Two



The flight was, as usual, uninteresting. I'm not a fan of air travel, since I don't actually get to fly the plane. Surrendering control of my life to someone I've never actually met on the basis of a uniform with wings on it, issued by a corporation interested in keeping costs low, does not make for a relaxing experience. And you can't make up for that with a bag of pretzels and a Diet Coke.

Back on the ground, in cold, windy Newark, New Jersey, I started to feel empowered again. After all, here I controlled my own destiny. I picked up my battered blue minivan from Cut Rate Parking, used my EZ Pass to gain access to the New Jersey Turnpike, and fought the final stages of rush hour toward Midland Heights. Familiarity may breed contempt, but at least it's, um, familiar. Not having to check a map every fifteen seconds, which I had to do in L.A., was a huge and welcome relief.

I pulled into my driveway, hungry and tired, at 8:15. Luckily, I travel light, so the canvas bag holding my screenwriter equipment and my one carry-on case were the only items I had to maneuver into the house. But after only four days, I had already gotten out of the habit of wearing a heavy coat, and was already trying to remember why I didn't live in a warmer climatic zone.

Entering the house was no small feat, since four small feet were waiting for me just inside the door. Mr. Warren T. Dog (the "T" is for "The"), the beagle/basset mix we'd liberated from a shelter not long before, can hear a fly walking on the outside wall of a building two blocks away, and so he heard me coming up the steps to the front door. When I opened it, he was squealing and pacing in front of the door, making it difficult to get by without petting him, so I patted his head. He looked disappointed, as if I should have immediately taken him for a walk, or at least fed him some hamburger meat.

Ethan, as twelve years old as a kid with Asperger's Syndrome can get (which means he was often twelve going on nine), was sprawled about the sofa in the living room, one foot, with shoe, on the cushion, and one off, in a T-shirt and shorts. He didn't know it was in the twenties outside, because twelve-year-old boys don't have nerve endings. He was staring blankly at a Disney Channel movie called "The Luck of the Irish," which they run about every 20 minutes. I was hoping some day to make as much from screenwriting in a year as the guy who wrote this TV movie gets in a month of reruns.

"Hi, Dad." For all he noticed, I could have just come home from getting a gallon of milk at the convenience store. Depending on to whom one speaks, Asperger's Syndrome (AS, for those of us in the know) is either a form of, or similar to, high-functioning autism. Kids like Ethan, who are on the higher-functioning end of the autism spectrum, are not severely hampered in their lives, but need help understanding the world's finer points—like the fact that when their fathers leave home for four days, it's not the same as a trip to the neighborhood video store.

"Hi, kiddo. Come here." I held out my arms to embrace him, and he looked at me like I had to be insane. "Come on."

He glanced at the TV screen again, but he knew I was serious. He stood, walked to me, and put his arms around me awkwardly, making sure he was positioned to keep his eyes turned toward the kid on TV who was turning into a leprechaun right before the big basketball game. No, I'm not kidding.

"I'm glad to see you," I told my son.

"Uh-huh," he answered lovingly. I let him go because two better huggers were headed my way from the kitchen.

Leah, newly nine years old, was, unsurprisingly, faster than her mother, but I had to bend to receive the flying hug she offered. It was worth it, since Leah hugs whole-armedly, essentially wrapping herself around the huggee in an outpouring of affection. A Leah hug is worth flying 3,000 miles.

"Hello, pussycat," I said. Despite my general indifference to cats, I used it as a term of affection. "I missed you."

"I missed you, too, Daddy," came the chirpy voice a quarter inch away from my left ear. "Did you bring me something?"

I put my daughter down. "You'll see when I unpack my bag," I told her.

“That means yes.” She eyed my bag the way Warren eyes a roast beef we’re having for dinner.

Ethan looked up from the couch. “Did I get something, too?”

I turned to Abby. “This he hears,” I said. She smiled widely and put her arms around me. A hug from Abby is worth traveling 3,000 miles, too, but for different reasons.

“Welcome home,” she said. For a few moments, I felt quite welcome indeed. Then, of course, I had to let go and resume the non-hugging part of my life, which in my opinion is vastly inferior to the hugging part. Then again, if you were hugging all the time, it would be difficult to ride a bicycle.

“Have you eaten?” Abby asked.

“You’re such a Jewish lady.”

“Nonetheless.”

“They gave us something on the plane, but I’m not sure what it was, or what time zone I was in at the time. I didn’t eat it, anyway.”

“So you’ve had about 25 Diet Cokes and you’re loaded with caffeine?” Abby stood marveling at how I managed to survive four days without her dietary supervision. Luckily, God had invented the cellphone.

“That’s about the size of it.”

“Come in the kitchen. I’ve got some chicken left over from dinner.”

As I followed my wife toward the kitchen, Leah took hold of my hand. “Daddy . . . She looked up at me with big expressive eyes, and I thought I saw a tear welling up in one of them. I knelt.

“What’s the matter, baby girl?”

“Aren’t you going to give me my present?” Her lip actually quivered.

I waved a hand at her as I stood up, ever so creakily. “Go through the bag,” I told her. “Just don’t destroy any of my stuff.”

“Yay!”

Ethan looked over and considered joining in the hunt for gifts. Luckily for him, the leprechaun movie went to commercial. He rushed around the couch to help his sister plunder through my luggage. My underwear flew in various directions as I walked to the kitchen.

Abby was taking a plate out of the oven with a potholder. She set it down on a ceramic tile with an Al Hirshfeld caricature of Groucho Marx on it—I had bought it when I was in college, and it had somehow survived. I

could see the plate held oven-fried chicken and a baked potato with some broccoli hidden in it. My wife looked after me well.

“You were ready for me,” I said.

“Watch out, the plate’s hot,” she said, turning perfectly into the next set of embraces I’d planned for her.

“So are you,” I said.

“Eat. You’ll need your strength for later, unless the jet lag’s gotten you.” She smiled and walked to the dishwasher.

“Remember, I *gained* three hours. My body thinks it’s late in the afternoon right now. By eleven o’clock, I’ll be at the height of my energy.” She pretended to look horrified. At least, I *think* she was pretending.

She sat next to me at the table. “So you didn’t get the option yet, huh?”

“Keep in mind that ‘yet’ is the operative word in that sentence,” I told her.

“Still, you flew out there for four days . . .

“To get to the point where I understand what Glenn wants, and once I give it to him, I’ll get the option. It’s a question of weeks—a couple of weeks probably.” The chicken wasn’t the least bit dry. It was crunchy and flavorful. If I had cooked it, you could have used it for a game of shuffleboard.

“It’s not a sure thing, though, is it? I mean, we do kind of need the money, Aaron.” Abby had a point. When a pipe had burst, we’d had to tear out and replace all the plumbing in the upstairs bathroom, and though our semi-resident contractor Preston Burke had been sympathetic, he didn’t forget to give us a bill. Owning a home is more fun than human beings should be allowed to have.

“It’s close to a sure thing,” I said through potato. I was hungry, and Abby is about as fine a chef as I’ve ever met. It’s one of the many ways in which my wife is perfection personified. “I’ll make some changes—not really big ones, either—and send it to Glenn, and he’ll pony up the cash. Believe me, I’ve been through this before. He wouldn’t have flown me out there if he didn’t think he could sell it.”

Abby raised an eyebrow as she thought a moment. “I’d feel better,” she said, “if I knew a check was in the mail.”

“So would I, but what could I do?” I asked. “Dazzle him with my non-existent reputation and flash the Writer’s Guild card I don’t yet have? I have

no leverage.”

“Larry Gelbart doesn’t work on spec, you know.”

“Larry Gelbart is god.”

“True.”

The phone rang. “I’ve got it!” Leah screamed as she ran from the living room into my office.

“Check and see who it is,” I reminded her. Before we added Caller ID to the office phone, she would answer no matter what, and then hand me the phone to fend off the inevitable mortgage refinancer or siding salesman interrupting our dinner.

“I will!” She looked at the hard-to-read display. “It’s somebody named Cherry.”

“Cherry?” Abby and I looked at each other. “You mean Shery?”

“Oh. Yeah.” Leah is a fine reader, but she panics a bit when the answering machine is about to pick up.

I stood and walked to the phone, looking at Abby. “Lori’s calling again? It must be important.” Abby nodded, but looked at my plate with some dismay. Great artists don’t like to have their work interrupted, no matter how reasonable the pretext.

“Lori?” I said.

“How’d you know? . . . Oh, you have that box, don’t you?” Lori Shery, the president and co-founder of ASPEN (ASPerger Syndrome Education Network), doesn’t call often, but her voice is always welcome on the other end of the phone. Even now, through what sounded like stress, it had a friendly, warm tone to it that is the perfect sound for a parent whose child has just been diagnosed with AS, and who doesn’t know where to turn. I know.

Lori started ASPEN out of her living room at virtually the same moment Ethan was diagnosed, when he was in kindergarten. Abby had stumbled across Lori’s web address while doing some Internet research on this new condition we’d just heard of, which our son will have all his life. And Lori was, indeed, a godsend.

She had calmed our fears, which all AS parents have in the beginning. No, she said, our son wouldn’t necessarily have to live out his adulthood in a group home and work at Burger King because he has Asperger’s. Yes, it’s going to be difficult, but not so difficult you can’t handle it. Lori herself is

an Asperger parent, and she is nothing if not experienced, knowledgeable, and confident.

Before I knew it, I was actually taking part in ASPEN, despite my absolute refusal to attend any kind of meeting involving any group since being initiated into the boys service club—the Ciceronians—at Bloomfield High School in the 1970s. I'm still not much of a joiner, but participating in ASPEN gave me the background I needed to understand what Ethan would require from his school and from us, his parents. Then, I started feeling experienced enough to reassure new parents myself, and that is another kind of blessing.

I also write a quirky column for Lori's newsletter, which she constantly has to remind me about. Non-paying work is sometimes more difficult for a freelance writer to remember, I'm ashamed to say. But it's true, and I assumed she was calling because I was in danger of missing the latest deadline, which I was pretty sure fell sometime this month.

Now, however, the tension in her voice was telling me this call wasn't about 750 words on the lighter side of Asperger's Syndrome.

"What's wrong, Lori?"

"You've known me a long time, haven't you?" she asked. "Well, I have a big favor to ask."

"You know you can have whatever you want."

"I need you to investigate a murder," said Lori.

I'd been asked to do that just twice before, and in both cases, resisted as hard as I could until there was no alternative. For one thing, I think my track record would convince anyone I'm ill-suited to that kind of work, and for another, I'm a coward, and murders tend to be perpetrated by violent people. Other people don't do windows. I don't do murders.

But this was Lori Shery doing the asking. Lori, besides being an old friend and one whom I owe about 168 favors, is also a force of nature. If something stands between her and what she needs, she simply ignores it until it goes away—or she bulldozes over it and teaches it a lesson. Lori is not to be denied—ever.

"Sure," I said.

Chapter Three



“**R**eally?” Lori said. “I thought you’d have to be convinced.” “Normally, I would,” I told her. “But I can’t turn you down. I just hope you remember who your friends are when inevitably you’re elected the first female Jewish President of the United States.”

“Stop it,” Lori laughed. I wasn’t kidding.

“Why are you asking about a murder?” Well, somebody had to bring it up.

Her voice became more serious. “Aaron, a man was shot to death in North Brunswick Tuesday night, and one of our children is suspected of killing him.” In the Asperger realm, a parent never says “kids with AS.” They say “our children.” It’s a form of shorthand. We insiders know what it means. The accused had Asperger’s. “I know it’s not true,” Lori continued, “but nobody’s trying to help this boy. They’re so set on tying it all up neatly that they’re ignoring the facts.”

“What facts?”

“Well, if you knew Justin, I wouldn’t even have to tell you. He’s so gentle, so sweet. You know how these kids can be, Aaron . . .

“Those aren’t facts, Lori,” I told her. “That’s you being an Asperger’s mom. You know perfectly well that people with AS are just as capable of anger as anyone else, and that impulse control isn’t at the top of their abilities list.”

Abby, listening to my end of the conversation, looked baffled and concerned. I covered the mouthpiece and whispered, “Lori’s calling about an AS kid accused of murder.” Abby’s eyes widened. “When?” she whispered back.

“Tuesday,” I whispered back, and she began to rummage through the pile of newspapers we keep under the kitchen counter so our disheveled house will look slightly more sheveled.

“If you’d just meet him, Aaron,” Lori said, “you’ll see.”

“Why do the cops think he did it, Lori? I realize you have the incontrovertible evidence that Justin is a nice kid, but are they relying on that pesky evidence thing?”

Abby came up with a copy of the *Star-Ledger* and started leafing through it. “They have some evidence,” Lori said, her voice suddenly smaller. “But it doesn’t mean anything.”

“What doesn’t mean anything?” Abby found the article she was looking for in the Middlesex County section of Wednesday’s newspaper, and started reading.

“Like, they found . . . the gun . . . in Justin’s room.”

“The murder weapon?”

“Yes.” Lori paused, waiting for me to make a skeptical noise. I didn’t. “Justin’s special interest is guns,” she said.

For an Asperger’s kid, a “special interest” is the one subject in the world that’s so fascinating, so utterly engrossing, that it takes them to the brink of obsession (and, to be honest, sometimes beyond). By those with a taste for kitschy nicknames, AS is sometimes called the “little professor” syndrome because the person with Asperger’s can go on and on ad infinitum about whatever the special interest subject happens to be—doorknobs, train schedules, the migration patterns of Canadian geese, whatever.

I groaned. A special interest in firearms wasn’t going to help prove this kid’s innocence. Finding the murder weapon in his bedroom was even worse. What was Lori getting me into?

Abby picked up the paper and walked toward me. “Does this Justin have a lawyer, and while we’re at it, a last name?” I was hoping Abby would at least know what the legal standards were for getting the kid prosecuted as a juvenile rather than an adult.

“Justin Fowler. And yes, he has an attorney, J. Bernard Tyson.”

Abby held the paper up for me to see, then handed it to me when it became obvious I wasn’t looking where she wanted me to look. I held it in one hand and she pointed.

The second paragraph of the article (which was written by a staff member whose name I knew) read: “Justin Fowler, 22, was arrested late last

night and is expected to be charged with the crime this morning in North Brunswick municipal court.”

Twenty-two?

“Lori,” I said, as calmly as possible, “when you say, ‘one of our children . . .’”

“I know,” she admitted. “Justin’s not a child. He’s twenty-two years old.”

There went charging him as a juvenile.

“Is there anything else you need to tell me—like they found him hovering over the body with blood on his hands? Some other little detail you might have overlooked?”

“Well,” Lori said, “did I mention he’s confessed?”

“No,” I told her. “I think that might have slipped your mind.”

Chapter Four



“There’s something I haven’t told you,” Abby said.

I was in the bedroom, unpacking my bag, and she was almost through putting the bed back together. We almost never make the bed in the morning, and since I hadn’t been there today, only Abby’s side was mussed. I took a pile of clothes out of my travel bag and dumped them into the hamper.

“You’re not going to tell me you’re really a man, are you?” I asked. “Because I was present at the births of our children, and would be completely surprised.”

“I talked to my brother a couple of days ago,” she said, ignoring my attempt at wit.

“How is Howard?” I asked, trying to keep my voice neutral.

Abby’s older brother Howard is everything I’m not—tall, successful, serious—did I mention successful?—so naturally he wonders what the heck his baby sister ever saw in me. He began expressing these doubts sometime during the second Reagan Administration, and he hasn’t stopped since. I, of course, have responded with the level of maturity and logic you’d expect—in private, I moan piteously to my wife. Maturity means different things to different people.

“He’s fine. He and Andrea are bringing Dylan for a visit in a couple of days.” Abby looked at me, daring me to react, and I did my best not to move a facial muscle. It took effort, and made me greater appreciate the Keanu Reeves School of Acting.

A visit from Abby’s brother and his family—especially his fifteen-year-old son Dylan, the sports star, honor student, class president, and all-around pain in the rear—meant constant reminders of what a screw-up I am, and pressure to keep Ethan, the anti-Dylan, from having a melt-down when the

families actually have to be together. I was not, let's say, enthusiastic about the forthcoming visit.

"Where are they going to be staying?" I asked, knowing that the three of them probably wouldn't be commuting back and forth to St. Paul, Minnesota every night—although a man can dream.

"Well, I thought maybe they could stay here," she mumbled.

Keanu Reeves be damned—my jaw dropped. "Tell me you're kidding."

"They couldn't get a hotel, Aaron."

I almost dropped the shaving kit in my hand. "Oh, come on, Abby," I said. "They couldn't get a hotel in Central New Jersey during the third week in December? Yeah, this is the big tourist season here in the greater New Brunswick area. Let's face it—your brother, despite having more money than everyone on this block put together, is tighter than J. Lo's jeans."

"All right, so he's a little thrifty."

"Scrooge McDuck is a little thrifty. Your brother is cheap."

"Aaron, he's my brother."

She gave me a look that indicated the night might not turn out the way I'd hoped, and I softened my tone as I slammed the closet door, hoping the recently inserted travel bag wouldn't fall out. "Okay, so they're staying here. Where? Where will the three of them sleep?"

Abby sat down on the bed, dressed in pajama pants and a New Jersey Bar Association t-shirt. Luckily, I've had years of practice suppressing the impulse to launch myself at her whenever I want. "I thought Howard and Andrea could have the sofa bed in the basement, and Dylan could use a sleeping bag on the floor in Ethan's room."

"Ethan's room? You want to put the two of them in one bedroom? Are you serious?"

"Well, I can't put him in Leah's room, and I don't think we want him in here. It's just seven days, Aaron. And Dylan's not a bad kid."

"You have a blind spot, Abby," I said, sinking into the bed. "Dylan and Ethan are oil and water. It's going to be very tough."

She looked at me with wide-open, clear, intelligent eyes. I would have to spend an hour in the freezer to return to a completely solid state. "Honey, I want to have some kind of a relationship with my brother. I want our families to get along. That's not too much to ask, is it?"

I touched her hand, and uncharacteristically, she melted into my arms. Women have any number of ways to assert their superiority over men, and Abby is in the top two percent of women in virtually every category.

“No,” I said, “it’s not.”

She kissed me. Men have any number of ways to get women to sleep with them. I’m in the bottom ten percent in that category, but I’m great at agreeing with my wife when she’s right.

Chapter Five



The next morning, I resumed my regular mélange of activities— food prepared and packaged, hair brushed, teeth cleaned, clothes located, dog cleaned up-after, exercise postponed, and loved ones sent out the front door.

To gain access to the people I'd need to interview for the Justin Fowler story, I decided it would help to have an assignment from a publication of some kind. It wouldn't be an awful thing, I decided, if I could make some money from the investigation. So as soon as nine a.m. rolled around, I called Lydia Soriano, the features editor at *Snapdragon* Magazine, with whom I had worked once before on a murder-related story.

Lydia was, of course, at her desk at nine exactly. She is a warm and humorous person (you reading this, Lydia? Give me work!) despite being a remarkably efficient and talented editor. In the freelance biz, you once in a while get lucky.

With an editor you don't know, you generally send a pitch letter or "query letter," which these days is usually done by email or fax. You detail the story you have in mind, tell the editor why s/he would be a complete and total idiot for ignoring it, and mention a couple of things near the bottom of the page about what a talented and award-winning journalist you are, even though you've won only one award, and it was for second place . . . and the publication you were working for kept the certificate. Hey, an award's an award.

When the editor is one with whom you've worked before, you call up and say, "How about this?" which is quicker and more efficient than doing it the other way, and keeps you, the freelance writer, in the editor's thoughts. Even if the story you're pitching isn't one the editor decides to use, an assignment lying there on his/her desk might suddenly seem perfect for your magic touch.

All of which is to say that I knew Lydia, and even though I considered it a long shot that Snapdragon would care about a murder in North Brunswick, New Jersey, pitching her was a better bet than sending a letter out to some editor I didn't know and wait until the letter, by some miracle, was read.

"I called you a few days ago, Aaron," she said. "I told your wife, 'I don't have anything for you right now.'"

"Isn't it possible I'm just calling to see how you are?" I asked. "Don't you think maybe I'm concerned about your welfare?"

"No."

"Okay, you got me. But I have something you might be able to use." I told her the basic facts as I understood them: a well-to-do North Brunswickian named Michael Huston had been shot with what appeared to be an antique pistol while walking his dog three nights ago. A young man who worked in a gun shop, Justin Fowler, who has Asperger's Syndrome, had been arrested and charged.

"Doesn't sound like much," Lydia said. "They caught the guy who did it."

"Well, there are those who think he *didn't* do it," I pointed out.

"Yeah, but he confessed." I had debated telling her that part, and was kicking myself for not doing so.

"People with Asperger's often fall prey to the good cop/bad cop thing," I told her. "They'll do anything for someone they perceive as a friend, even confess to a crime they didn't commit."

"What is this Ass . . . what? It sounds like a fast food item made from donkeys."

"My son has Asperger's, Lydia," I said.

"Oops. I'm sorry, Aaron." I actually didn't mind all that much. Putting an editor in a weak position is never a bad idea.

"It's okay. But I'm saying I understand the condition. That's what the story's about. They say more than two million people in this country have AS, and most of them don't know it. Here's a great way to dramatize what it's all about."

She hummed a little to herself as she thought about it. "Still, it's a local murder in New Jersey. Last time we worked together, it was a national

story”—and one I’ve told elsewhere. It involved a toupee, a former high school sex symbol, and a six-inch kitchen knife.

“This is a national story,” I pushed. “It’s about a disorder that strikes someone resembling people all your readers will know. In fact, I’ll bet you know somebody with Asperger’s, even if there’s one degree of separation.”

“Well, I know your son,” she said.

“See?”

“Five hundred words, Aaron,” Lydia finally said. My freelancer’s mind immediately calculated the fee at \$1,000. Not great, but you don’t turn down work. Besides, I was going to be covering this story with or without an assignment.

“That’s not much,” I said. Nobody ever got anywhere in this business being timid.

“It’s five hundred more words than I intended to give you,” she said.

“Good point,” I said.

Chapter Six



Armed with a fresh and legitimate magazine assignment, I forwarded the calls from my home phone to my cell phone and drove south out of Midland Heights through Highland Park, then across the Albany Street Bridge to Rt. 18, which eventually led to Rt. 1 South, and North Brunswick. The whole trip took less than fifteen minutes.

Lori had given me Justin Fowler's address, and informed his mother that I'd be coming by. The house was blue, vinyl sided, with a small screened-in porch, and a tiny, nicely tended lawn.

Mary Fowler answered the door practically before I rang. She must have been watching through the front window and seen me drive up, because I was still smoothing out my coat when the door opened.

She looked tired. Having a son with Asperger's will wear anyone out, and she'd begun the task ten years before Ethan was born. Having a son accused of murder greatly compounded the burden. Still, she offered a warm hand, and I took it.

"Mr. Tucker, I presume," she said. "Lori told me you'd be here soon."

"Lori never lies," I answered, establishing our common bond. "And she never lets a parent down. May I come in?"

Mary looked embarrassed and opened the screen door a little wider. "Sorry," she said. "Where are my manners?"

I walked into the living room, which was dominated by the kind of grandfather clock obviously handed down from generation to generation. Unfortunately, the room surrounding it wasn't quite as grand or regal, so the clock looked like a king visiting the commoners for the annual tournaments.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Fowler," I said. "You have nothing to be sorry about."

"It's Mary, Mr. Tucker. And may I get you something to drink?"

"No, I'm fine. And call me Aaron. Is Justin here?"

Mary looked embarrassed, and stared past me for a moment, not wanting to make eye contact. “No,” she said. “They’re holding him on \$200,000 bail, and I don’t have that kind of money.”

Abby had thought the Middlesex County prosecutor might want bigtime bail. While Justin had been charged with aggravated manslaughter and not pre-meditated murder, the bail was still set high, with no option for putting up just ten percent in cash. Mary would have to mortgage her house to a bail bondsman if she wanted to get her son out of county jail.

She thought I should see Justin’s room. Like many young Asperger adults, Justin was not ready to live on his own, even though he had graduated with an associate’s degree from Middlesex County College and had a full-time job. The pressure of living in a world populated with other people, and having to maintain a household of some kind on his own, would have been too much for him to handle.

His room, which was smaller than Ethan’s, couldn’t have changed much since high school. But instead of the posters of bands or basketball players you might have expected, the walls were covered with pictures of guns. Rifles, automatics, pistols, revolvers. Guns, preferably by themselves, but sometimes in the hands of their owners, were clearly Justin’s heroes.

“When did he develop his interest in guns?” I asked.

“It doesn’t help his case, does it?” she said. “I think it started in high school. He had gotten hold of some gun magazine or another, and that was it. It’s all he talks about. But I never let him own one.”

“He doesn’t own the gun they found?” In Justin’s room, the police had discovered an antique gun, described as a single-shot de-ringer replica of the handgun John Wilkes Booth used on Abraham Lincoln. Apparently, he hadn’t tried to hide it—it was sitting right there on his desk. Ballistic tests confirmed it as the weapon used to kill Michael Huston.

“No, it wasn’t registered to him. I frankly was shocked when they told me they’d found it there, and I thought the police had planted the gun in Justin’s room. But Justin said it was his.”

The murder had been four days earlier, so the room was no longer considered a crime scene, although a few tiny remnants of yellow police tape dotted the doorjamb. Crime scene investigators had been through and taken anything they considered of interest, so I didn’t expect to find any

evidence that Justin was or wasn't involved in the killing. I sat on the edge of his single bed and looked at his mother.

"What led the police to Justin in the first place?" I asked.

"I guess it was the gun," Mary said. "Once they found out what kind of gun it was, they started looking for area enthusiasts. It didn't seem to take long. They were here with a search warrant two days ago."

"Mary, I'm going to have to ask some questions that aren't easy to answer. I want you to know, I have a son with Asperger's, and I understand, okay? If I'm going to find out what happened, you have to tell me everything."

Mary Fowler looked me straight in the eye, and even if her gaze was a little teary, it was unwavering. "Whatever you need to know, Aaron."

"Has Justin ever been . . . aggressive with people? Kids in school when he was little, maybe with girls when he was in high school or college, just because he didn't understand?"

"You mean, is he violent?" Mary didn't need the jargon, and was telling me so.

"Yes."

"He . . . got into a few fights when he was a boy, but you know these kids, Aaron. He always lost. His impulse control isn't great, but he did learn that getting beaten up didn't get him much."

I didn't like the way this was going. "Do you think that might have fueled his interest in guns?" I asked.

Mary hadn't considered that idea before. Her eyes widened a bit, and she leaned lightly against the dresser.

But before she had a chance to answer, a loud sound from the driveway interrupted us. It was the unmistakable cacophony of a very large motorcycle. That noise ended, thankfully, and another, less piston-driven one, began in the kitchen, just to our left on the other side of the hallway. Someone was walking in through the side door.

Actually, "walking" is understating it. "Barreling" would be more descriptive. Young, in his late teens or early 20s, the large person entered the house as if he were Superman and this was one of those paper maché walls they were always setting up for him to burst through, when there was a perfectly good door maybe four feet to the side. Long hair flopped over his forehead and a sense of absolute purpose burned in his eyes. "Ma!" he

yelled. Then he saw us standing in Justin's room, and advanced on us like Patton on . . . wherever Patton advanced on. I was an English major, not a history major.

"Where have they got him, Ma? When's he getting out?" The young man looked me up and down, which doesn't take long, and didn't like what he saw. "Who's this guy?"

"Kevin, this is Aaron Tucker. He's investigating the case and trying to help Justin. Aaron, this is my younger son, Kevin."

I reached out a hand, but Kevin was still suspicious, and I ended up looking like I had just finished a round of curling, hand extended with nothing to show for it.

"Investigating? Are you a private eye or something?"

"No, I'm a freelance writer, and I'm working for *Snapdragon* Magazine, but . . .

"A reporter? No press, Ma! We don't have time for these . . .

Mary put her hands on her son's well-developed upper arms, the apparent result of considerable iron-pumping. "It's not like that, Kev. Aaron has a son with Asperger's, and he's trying to prove that Justin didn't do it."

Kevin wasn't enthused about the word "Asperger's," which showed on his face. He also wasn't crazy about the press.

"Is that right?" He appeared to think he was the captain of the football team and I was a bespectacled, 50-pound waterboy. "How you gonna go about doing that, *Aaron*?"

I looked around for the hall monitor, but none was in sight. "I don't know yet," I said. "I'm going to ask questions and see where the answers lead me."

Kevin moved closer. I was beginning to worry that, in my mid-40s, I was going to get my first wedgie. He towered over me, but I'm used to that, and aside from a little tension in the back of my neck, it didn't bother me much.

"Like what kind of questions?" Desperately, I fought the impulse to answer in an exaggerated voice, "like what *kinda* questions." Luckily, I'm an adult, and have learned self-restraint. It didn't hurt that Mary stepped between us.

"Kevin! That's no way to treat someone who's trying to help!"

“You don’t know these people, Ma. He’s just interested in getting himself a big by-line so he can use us to get rich and famous.”

I smiled my wisest, most self-deprecating “experienced-old-freelancer” smile. “The famous part isn’t really all that important,” I said. “But I would like to know where you’ve been, Kevin. Obviously, this is the first time you’ve been home since Justin was arrested.”

Kevin remembered his initial mission, which was to rescue his brother and be a hero. He did everything but flex his muscles and eat spinach right out of a can with no fork. “I was away at school,” he said. “University of Indiana.”

I considered asking if he was on the varsity intimidation team, but decided not to give in to my juvenile impulses. Of course, I didn’t make any moves or sounds to indicate how impressed I was by his admission into a college, either. Maturity only goes so far when you’re smaller than most fifteen-year-olds.

“So you came home as soon as you were called?”

“Sure,” Kevin said, defensively. He must have been on the defensive squad of the intimidation team. “It takes a while to bike from there.”

“Then, you’ve been in transit . . .

Kevin wasn’t looking at me anymore. He was concerned with his mother. “This isn’t getting us anywhere, Ma,” he said. “Where’s Justin?”

“He’s in the county jail. They set bail at \$200,000, and I don’t know. . .

“What? Two hundred grand? That’s ridiculous! He can’t stay in that jail by himself!”

I understood the concern. A relative naïf like Justin in a jail full of repeat offenders wasn’t a pleasant thought. But neither is going so far into debt that you might never get out, assuming it’s even possible to raise that much money.

“Well,” Mary said in a tiny voice, “I already have a mortgage on the house, and I can’t borrow much more. I don’t know what to do.”

This was the moment Kevin had been waiting for. He zipped up his black leather jacket and turned toward the door, in his best Cosmic Avenger style.

“Don’t you worry, Ma. I’m getting him out. Now.” And he turned and strode (there is no other word for it) out of the house. The cacophony began in the driveway again.

On a chair beside Justin's desk, Mary sat down wearily, not even moving the pants that Justin or the cops had left there. She had promised herself she'd be strong in front of the guest, but it was too much to ask. Mary Fowler began to cry.

Chapter Seven



On the way back home, I called Barry Dutton in his office. The Midland Heights chief of police was between meetings—one with our mayor and council, and another with a group of area rabbis who wanted him to report any Orthodox Jews caught speeding on Saturday, when they were barred from getting behind the wheel of any car, speeding or not.

Strikingly, he still chose to take my call. “Aaron, I’m not going to send a patrol car to follow Leah home from school every day. I’m not. The child can walk the three blocks on her own.”

“If it was your daughter . . . I began.

Barry rumbled, which I took for a chuckle. “My daughter,” he said, “is a six-foot-one black woman and can kick the ass of anyone who gives her trouble.”

“Could you send *her* to follow Leah home from school?”

“What do you want, Aaron?”

I had to be delicate about this, because Barry is a sensitive guy. The two other times I investigated a murder, he felt my participation was—shall we say?—inappropriate. In fact, he thought I should “stick to writing about which DVD player is cooler than the others.” Because the proper presentation here would be extremely important, I decided it’d be better to ease into the subject.

“I’m investigating this murder . . . I began. I actually heard him drop the phone.

“I’m sorry, Aaron,” Barry said after picking up the handset. “I thought you said something about investigating a murder. And I’m sure you *couldn’t* have said that, because I remember telling you the last time that if you chose to do that again, the next murder you investigated would be your own.”

“This is different.”

“The last time, you said it was ‘different.’ And I ended up sending two officers to cut you out of a chair you’d been duct-taped to in a hotel in New Brunswick. So don’t tell me it’s different.”

“I wasn’t in any danger, was I? Besides, this is an Asperger’s thing. Lori Shery wants me to do it.” Lori once spoke to the state association of police chiefs about AS people getting involved with the criminal justice system, and she had so wowed Barry, he was offering to instruct a course for his officers by the end of the same week.

He knew when he was trapped. “Lori?” he asked tentatively.

“Yeah. And you don’t want me to tell her you called me off, do you?”

He groaned, which sounded like Darth Vader having an asthma attack. “What do you need, Aaron?”

“How well do you know the chief of police in North Brunswick?”

“Not very. Her name is Les Baker.”

“*Her* name?”

“They’re very progressive in North Brunswick.”

“Cool.”

Barry’s voice showed concern. “Is this about that guy shot with the old gun?”

“Yeah. The kid they picked up for it has AS. He’s into guns, but his mom swears he doesn’t own any.”

“The fact that they found the gun in his room might indicate otherwise. Did you tell your mother everything you were doing when you were twenty-two?”

“I don’t have Asperger’s. They’re not incapable of lying, but most of them are really bad at it.”

“You probably *did* tell your mother everything you were doing when you were twenty-two.” Barry is a nice man, but he can be a real pain when he puts his mind to it.

“Anyway,” I sighed, “I’m guessing you don’t know Chief Baker well enough to call her and put in a good word for me.”

“Which word would that be? ‘Irritant?’ ‘Problem?’ ‘Obstruction?’”

“You’re a nice man,” I told him, “but you can be a real pain when you put your mind to it.”

“That’s exactly what I could tell her about you,” Dutton said, his chuckle rumbling again. “If you want me to.”

I hung up on him. It gives me a certain feeling of power to do that to my local chief of police, no matter how much he'll make me pay for it later.

The cell phone rang a minute or two later. I checked the incoming number, but didn't recognize it, so I opened my phone.

"Hello?"

The voice was female, but authoritative. "Aaron Tucker?" "Depends. Who's calling?"

"This is Chief Leslie Baker of the North Brunswick Police Department."

Barry Dutton worked fast. "In that case, yes," I said. "This is Aaron Tucker. I guess Chief Dutton called you."

"Yes," said Baker. "And he said to tell you he should have left you in the chair with the duct tape. Does that mean anything to you?"

"No," I answered. "Chief Dutton hallucinates sometimes."

"Is there something I can do for you, Mr. Tucker?"

"I'm writing about the murder of Michael Huston. Can you spare a few minutes?"

She exhaled, not meaning for me to hear it. While North Brunswick is a much larger town (with therefore a much larger police department) than Midland Heights, Baker was probably not used to dealing with murder investigations, or the publicity they usually generated. But she knew it was part of her job.

"I suppose so, but it'll have to be quick. Where are you?"

I gave her my location, and she directed me to the North Brunswick Municipal Complex on Hermann Road. Because I'm a trained investigative reporter, this immediately made me wonder whether the road had been named after Bernard Herrmann, who wrote so many memorable film scores for Alfred Hitchcock films. There was no way to know, so I put that out of my mind. But the music from *Vertigo* kept running through my head.

It took but a few minutes to get there, and after twice getting lost in the building, I found myself in Chief Leslie Baker's office, which was not only larger than Barry Dutton's, but also had carpeting. I made a mental note to inform Barry of these salient facts at my earliest convenience.

Chief Baker herself was a tall woman, about five-foot nine or ten, and in full uniform, she appeared to be roughly the size of the Empire State Building. She was on the phone when I walked in, but hung up and stood

ramrod straight, shook my hand with a grip that could have turned my hand into a maraca had she given it full force, and pointed me toward a chair. She was nothing if not physically impressive.

“Lieutenant Rodriguez is working on the Huston case,” she told me almost immediately. “But since Chief Dutton requested I speak to you, I’ll tell you whatever I can.”

I took the reporter’s notebook out of my back pocket—they are designed specifically to fit on your butt or in an inside jacket pocket, but I’m not classy enough to wear a sports jacket—and opened it to a blank page. Baker did not blink.

“What led to the questioning, and eventually the arrest, of Justin Fowler?” I asked.

Baker opened the file on her desk. Behind her, I noticed, was a picture of her shaking hands with one of the former presidents I hadn’t voted for. I tried not to hold it against her, and then saw a picture of her shaking hands with a former president I *had* voted for. Apparently, she was a bipartisan hand-shaker.

“According to Lt. Rodriguez’s report, once we discovered the kind of firearm that had killed Mr. Huston, Mr. Fowler was initially questioned as an expert on antique weaponry. But after the officers entered Mr. Fowler’s residence—with his permission—and discovered the weapon in his bedroom, the arrest was made.”

“You’re aware that Mr. Fowler has Asperger’s Syndrome?”

“Yes,” Baker noted a space on the report, then closed it to keep it from my gaze. Reporters are notorious for being able to read documents upside-down. She didn’t know, of course, that trying to do so usually makes me woozy. “I’m not terribly familiar with the condition, but Lieutenant Rodriguez did note it, and explained very briefly what it means.”

Baker, I could tell, was trying to be fair, but she didn’t want some wiseguy reporter busting into her office and screwing up her case, no matter how many police chiefs called her. But the swiftness of the arrest and the constant references to the file were making me suspicious. I didn’t think anything sneaky was going on, but I had a hunch she wasn’t telling me something.

“Among other things,” I said, “it could mean that Justin might confess to a crime he didn’t commit, if the interrogators made it clear that his

confession would please them, or make them his friends. He might not have a very firm grasp on the consequences of copping to a crime he didn't do."

"Are you his lawyer, Mr. Tucker?"

"I haven't even met his lawyer, Chief. But I do know something about Asperger's. My son . . .

"Chief Dutton told me about you," Baker said. "I understand you have a personal stake in this. But the fact is, Justin Fowler had the gun in his possession and he confessed to the crime."

"What's his motive? Why did he kill Michael Huston?"

"He said he had just gotten the gun, wanted to see if it would work, and chose Mr. Huston completely at random."

I couldn't help but curl my lip. "Oh, come on, Chief," I said. "There are a hundred ways Justin could have tested out this weapon. He didn't need to go out on a 10-degree winter night and shoot the first person he saw walking his dog. Asperger individuals might have poor impulse control, but they have to be provoked. There has to be an impulse to control. Your detectives put words in his mouth."

"Then explain how the murder weapon ended up in his bedroom," Baker said. "A gun with no serial number, a gun for which there's no record of purchase, and a gun for which there's no license. Clearly an illegal weapon, and one that would appeal only to a collector, since it's not nearly as powerful or efficient as anything manufactured today. Who else would choose to shoot someone with a single-ball deringer that has to be used at close range, Mr. Tucker?"

"It worked for John Wilkes Booth."

Baker stood. "I don't have anything else I can tell you. If you have further questions, you can direct them to Lieutenant Rodriguez."

"Can I see Justin Fowler? Can you get me in for an interview?"

Baker's lower lip twitched. "No need," she said. "I just got off the phone with the county jail. Justin Fowler made bail ten minutes ago."

Chapter Eight



Chief Baker could offer no explanation for Justin's seemingly impossible bail-out, and I had no time to go back to Mary Fowler's house—I was needed at home.

Other men might have considered the investigation of a murder to be more urgent than being in a chair behind a desk when a nine-year-old girl and her twelve-year-old brother got home from school. I'm proud, however, that I'm the one who's been there pretty much every day since they started school. Besides, it gives me an excuse for never having cleared what, in a civilized culture, would be considered minimum wage.

When I got home, Jeff Mahoney's battered old van, the one he calls the "Trouble Mobile," was parked in front of my battered old house. He was sitting in the driver's seat with a cup of Dunkin' Donuts coffee and the engine running, so the van's heater wouldn't turn off. His green uniform and green hat—with the logo of the rental car company whose vehicles Mahoney fixes on the road—were greasy, which is not unusual. The green hat was pulled over his eyes, and he was slouched back in the seat, which *was* unusual.

I got out of the car, walked to the van, and knocked on the window, producing a muffled sound because, uncharacteristically, I was wearing gloves. Mahoney didn't open his eyes, but he did take a sip of coffee. Then he sat up and looked, turned off the van, and got out. He wore no coat.

"Mr. Tucker," he said by way of greeting.

"Mr. Mahoney," I countered, showing off my originality.

"I need you to follow someone," he said.

I looked up at Mahoney, who stands a good ten inches taller than me.

"Who?"

"Me."

“Well,” I said, “suppose I follow you into the house. You don’t have a coat on.”

He looked surprised, but walked up the steps and waited for me to unlock the door. I thanked the powers of good for the invention of the radiator (I told you this was an old house) and took off five or six layers of clothing to look more like myself and less like the Michelin Man.

Mahoney took a long sip from his jumbo coffee cup while I put water on the stove to make my favorite cold-weather companion, fat-free hot chocolate (French Vanilla). I know, it’s hard to have confidence in a grown man who drinks something called “Swiss Miss,” but trust me, I’m macho as all get-out.

“Okay, I give up. How come I have to follow you, and where am I following you to?” Warren came in, intimidated by the large guest, but curious. Mahoney, without thinking, put down a hand for the dog to sniff, and within seconds was, as usual, Warren’s best friend. He scratched behind Warren’s ridiculously long ears.”

Somebody’s sabotaging my work,” he said with a straight face.

Warren and I stared at him. “Your work?” I finally said. “You fix rental cars that break down on the highway. How can somebody sabotage your work?”

We walked into my office, which is right near the kitchen, an unfortunate coincidence that has helped make me the man I am today—the one who carries around an extra ten or fifteen pounds. I sat in the big swivel chair in front of my desk, and Mahoney paced next to what I laughingly refer to as the “client’s chair,” an old dining room chair we don’t have room for anywhere else in the house.

“For the past three weeks, after I’m finished with a repair, someone has been tampering with the cars so that the repair is undone. They’re making it look like I didn’t do the work, and they’re screwing up my batting average.” Mahoney believes that the number of cars he repairs, and how well the job is done, appears in a box score in the newspaper every morning. He is determined to be the best at what he does, and thinks the rest of the world is hanging breathlessly on each repair he performs. It’s how he got to be the way he is, which is worth being.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “I don’t understand the process. You get a call from your company that a renter’s car has broken down. Is the customer

there when you arrive?”

“No,” Mahoney shook his head. “Usually, somebody at the company drives out with a replacement car, picks the renter up, then flags the original rental car so I can see it. Most often, there’s a rental agency near where the car has broken down, or at least nearer than I am, so the replacement car has arrived, and the customer has left, before I get there.”

The teapot began to whistle, so I got up and we moved back into the kitchen. I took the hot chocolate box out of the cabinet after I turned off the water, and started to create a 40-calorie drink that would take my mind off how drafty and cold the house gets no matter what you do. I noticed that Mahoney didn’t make a withering crack about the hot chocolate, which was not an encouraging sign.

“So how does the car get back after you repair it? You drive up in the van and fix the car. You can’t drive both the van *and* the car back.”

“That’s right,” Mahoney said as I stirred my drink. Exhausted after the long trip from my office, I sat at the kitchen table instead of going back inside. Besides, once I spilled the hot chocolate, I could mop it up much easier in the kitchen. You have to plan ahead. “I call the office when I’m done, and they send out a car with two guys in it. One of them drives the car back. If the car needs a part I don’t have, I call a tow truck, and they tow it away.”

I thought about that as Warren walked to Mahoney for another pat, and got it. “Do you stay with the car until the driver arrives, or is there a time when it’s repaired, but you’re already gone?”

Mahoney stroked Warren’s head and the dog, in his quest to make people do all they can for him, lay down, forcing Mahoney to bend over and rub the dog’s belly. “That’s how it works,” he said. “There’s a short time when the car is there by itself. I can’t wait around for the driver every time—I have more cars that need fixing.”

“So you think that if I follow you through your day, I’ll see whoever’s undoing your work.”

Mahoney nodded. He kept rubbing Warren’s belly, because the dog was doing his “eye trick,” the thing where he looks as pathetic as possible to elicit sympathy. It always works, and I’ve been trying to figure out how to do it myself when dealing with Abby. “That’s how I figure it,” he said. “And since you don’t actually have a job . . .

I raised one eyebrow, a trick I learned through years of watching Leonard Nimoy on *Star Trek*. “You have a funny way of asking someone for help.”

“It’s not something I do often,” he admitted.

“True. And I owe you about six thousand times over.”

Mahoney, who had knelt down to attend to Warren, groaned as he stood, and threw a melodramatic arm across his brow. “I just want the nightmare to end!” he wailed, then looked to see if I was buying the act, which I wasn’t. Warren, who doesn’t deal well with raw emotion, got up and left the room. Hell, if nobody was going to rub his belly . .

“You don’t know from nightmares,” I told Mahoney. “I’ll soon have to spend a week in this house with Abby’s brother and his family.”

Mahoney winced and sat down. “Howard?”

“The one and only.”

“No way you could find a business trip to go on for a week?”

Mentally thanking Leonard Nimoy, I raised my eyebrow again. “A minute ago, you said I don’t have a job. Now you want me to send myself away on assignment? Which is it? Besides, I just got back from a trip yesterday.”

As briefly as possible, I filled him in on the exciting details of the trip to Hollywood (really Santa Monica), and my current assignment for *Snapdragon* (really Lori Shery).

“So you have a rewrite to do that might finally jump-start your career, plus a murder investigation, plus Howard and his Yuppie version of a family coming to stay for seven fun-filled days.”

“That’s right,” I said.

“For a guy with no job, you’re pretty busy.”

“Remarkably so.”

“So, can you follow me tomorrow?” Suddenly, his eyes looked just like Warren’s.

“Sure,” I said.

Chapter Nine



Before I could start following Mahoney, however, I had to deal with my children. Ethan usually beats Leah home from school, since he doesn't have any interest in extracurricular activities or social interaction with other children. In other words, he doesn't have any school friends to slow him down.

Today, he lumbered into the house, ignoring the whines and cries of the dog, who did everything except leap into Ethan's arms and beg for attention. Ethan hung his overflowing backpack on the banister, yelled, "Hi, Dad," in no particular direction, and headed for the kitchen, where snacks are kept. He is his father's son.

Since I am, unlike Warren, gifted with the power of speech, I called into the kitchen, "How was your day?"

"Okay." Given that hearty chunk of data, I walked to his backpack and opened it, extracting the black and white notebook that Wilma Coogan, Ethan's aide at school, and I pass back and forth every day. Wilma, partial to Ethan as she has proven herself to be, might not tell me *everything* he won't mention, but she's certainly a better source of hard information than a twelve-year-old with Asperger's.

So, it was with a modest amount of surprise that I turned to today's page and read, "Hi, Aaron. Ethan forgot his science homework, and got a zero for the day. He reacted badly, and threw a pen at Ms. Markowski. Don't worry—I made sure he apologized and didn't get detention." Wilma then listed Ethan's homework for the next day, subject by subject, including the science worksheet he had apparently failed to bring in that day.

"Ethan!"

He ambled out of the kitchen and into my office, holding a brownie he'd found in the cabinet. Crumbs landed on his shirt, and, in a single

motion, he wiped them onto the floor, smearing his white shirt with chocolate. “Yes, Dad?”

“What happened in science?”

He scowled, knowing Wilma had dropped a dime (or, allowing for inflation, thirty-five cents) on him. “Nothing.”

“Nothing? Throwing a pen at a teacher is nothing?” I waved my arms over my head and smoothed my hair back like the primate I was becoming. “Ethan Atticus Tucker . . .

He hates his middle name, which was his mother’s idea (he doesn’t know the only reason it isn’t his *first* name is because I ran interference for him). Ethan clenched his teeth, which is exactly what I do when I get angry, and snarled. “I didn’t *hit* her with the pen,” he growled. “Nobody got hurt.”

“Not for lack of trying! Ethan, this is something I’ve been telling you since you were two, for chrissakes! You *can’t throw things at other people! You can’t hit other people! You can’t choke other people!*”

“I know, I know . . . How dare I belabor the point that he shouldn’t commit violence. “You don’t have to tell me again.”

“Apparently, I do. And why wasn’t your science homework done yesterday?”

“It was! Why doesn’t anyone *believe* me?” Exasperated, he stomped to the living room couch and flopped down, causing an audible crack in the frame of the old sofa.

I advanced on him, my temperature rising by the second, which wasn’t a bad thing, considering how cold it was in the room. “Do you have enough money for a new couch?” I asked him.

This caught him off guard, so he answered honestly. “No.”

“Then don’t destroy the one we already have, because I don’t, either!”

One way in which AS kids are just like all other kids is that they have virtually no patience for their parents. Ethan rolled his eyes and pursed his lips in the universal symbol of almost-teenagers who know so much more than the people who’ve been doing their laundry for twelve years. “Oh, give me a break,” he said.

The door burst open and Leah bounced in, heading, as she always does, directly for the dog. “Hello, Warren,” she cooed. “Who’s a good boy? Who’s a good boy?”

“Not me, according to Dad,” said Ethan. “He thinks everything that ever goes wrong is my fault.”

“That’s not true,” I told him, “and you know it.”

He ignored me entirely, which I’ve grown used to. Ethan sat and stared into the blank television screen as if watching a fascinating film that demanded his complete attention. He was actually watching his own reflection, but as a tactic, it had the desired effect. It annoyed me.

“Do your homework,” I said.

I’d been speaking to Leah, but it was the opening Ethan had been waiting for. He stood up and faced me with the blatant, pointless rebellion of youth.

“No,” he said.

Leah, sensing a storm on the horizon, grabbed up her backpack from the floor and went upstairs to her room, taking the dog with her.

“No?” I said, eyebrows raised. “What the hell do you mean, ‘no’?”

“I’m not doing my homework.” He had a smile on his face that said, “Go ahead. Make my day.” So I did.

I firmly put both my hands on his shoulders. “You’re going to do your homework, Ethan. And when you’re done with each page, you’re going to bring it over to me so I can see it, and then I’m going to watch you put it all in your backpack, so what happened today won’t happen again.” All the while, I tightened my hold on his shoulders.

“Ow!” Ethan is especially sensitive to touch, and a tiny bit of pain produces a reaction similar to what most people would experience if a cheetah was chewing off their legs. “Stop choking me!”

Reflexively, I took my hands away. “Choking you? That’s not choking you. My hands were nowhere near . . . As usual, I fell into a typical parent trap: addressing the side issues and losing sight of the main point. He still wasn’t doing his homework.

Ethan, rubbing one shoulder as if it were broken, started to tear up. Walking toward the stairs, he passed his backpack without removing anything.

“You get back down here, Ethan, and you get your books. You’re doing your homework. NOW!”

He kept walking.

Normally, I would have let things go until later, but this was a school issue and besides, I was pissed off. I ran halfway up the stairs and grabbed him by the arm.

“Hey!” I shouted. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“To my room . . . to play video games.”

I spoke very slowly. “Not until you do your homework.”

“No.” Defiance had worked for him before. He tried to turn, but I held his arm tightly.

“If you don’t do your homework now,” I said, teeth clenched, “I’m going to take the PlayStation out of your room. Forever!” Parents are constantly making threats they know they won’t ever carry out, expecting their kids to back down.

Ethan’s eyes widened. Here it came again. “NO!” he screamed, broke my hold on his arm, and ran into his room, slamming the door.

Because I’m a total idiot, I followed him. He held the door closed when I tried to open it. “Ethan!” I shouted.

“You can’t come in! It’s *my* room!”

But I’m bigger and heavier, for the moment, and stronger. I pushed my way into the room. Ethan, only a couple of inches shorter than I am, was fully in tears now. I had threatened his very way of life.

“I’m not kidding, Ethan. Do your homework now, or the video game goes.” You can’t back down on something like that, or they’ll never believe you again. And I thought impulse control was *his* problem.

“No!” he said, but he clearly knew he was going to capitulate, and I knew it, too. I might as well have told him I was going to break both his legs. For him, PlayStation was what the world was all about. I knew and exploited it. So much to be proud of, from just one short conversation.

“Why not?” I finally said. “Why don’t you want to do your homework?”

He thought about it for a long moment, and cried a little harder. “I don’t know,” he said. For some fathers, the day just isn’t complete until you’ve made a twelve-year-old boy sob like a baby.

“Be sensible. Just do the homework, and then you can play your game.”

“Okay.” He stood, walked to the door, turned the knob, and said the most stomach-dropping thing he possibly could.

“Thanks, Dad.”

He went to do his homework, and I pondered what a 43-year-old man would look like if he were crying. Instead, I went into Leah's room and held out my arms. She gave me a Leah hug, the finest form of therapy on the planet. Okay, second finest.

"Is the fight over?"

I nodded.

"I don't like it when you and Ethan fight, Daddy."

"I know, puss. But we don't mean the things we say." Now, there's a classy rationalization, huh?

"Warren doesn't like it, either." I looked at the dog, who was sleeping in a corner of the room and didn't look especially bothered.

"How can you tell?"

"I can tell," she said with a maturity far beyond her years, a maturity she's gained by watching her mother deal with me. "He came right up to my room, and usually he doesn't like to come up here because I close the door."

"You made your point," I told her.

"Besides, he whimpers and cries when you guys are yelling at each other . . .

"Leah . . .

". . . and he puts his tail between his legs . . .

"Leah. . .

". . . and besides . . .

Okay, she had me. "Besides what?"

"He told me."

I looked at her for a long time, wondering if my daughter was the next Son of Sam, before she burst out laughing. And after a while, I started to laugh, too.

If your children teach you properly, it is indeed possible to be a good parent.

Chapter Ten



Mahoney called me from the road the next morning at eight-thirty, as we had arranged. He told me the location of his first repair job of the day, a West Windsor address, which was actually somewhat convenient for me, since I wanted to drop in on Mary and Justin Fowler on the way back, and North Brunswick is about halfway. I told him I'd arrive about twenty minutes after he did, and find an out of sight place to park. If I was any good at this following gig, he wouldn't see me, but we'd keep in touch via cell phone.

I had a little time, so I pondered the Justin Fowler story. I had called the attorney for Karen Huston, the wife of the man whom Justin was accused of murdering. But this very pompous man named Rezenbach hadn't called back until after six, when I refuse to answer the phone unless the West Coast is calling. He left a message saying Mrs. Huston was "far too distraught" (no, I'm not kidding, the man said "distraught!") to submit to an interview. Maybe later in the week.

That left Justin himself. First, I had to figure out how they'd managed to come up with the \$200,000 that had sprung Justin, and from there, maybe I could find either a legitimate alibi for Justin at the time of the shooting, or a way to get the charge against him lowered to involuntary manslaughter. I understood so little about the incident that the questions were coming from seventeen different directions, and none of them added up.

Being confused took about twenty minutes, so I hopped into the Saturn (I felt the minivan, which I detest anyway, was too easy to spot on the highway) and headed toward the spot Mahoney had described.

It was on the side of Route One, in the northbound lane, toward an area of trees. Luckily, there was a Burger King in perfect position to view a new SUV with rental car plates and Mahoney's van in front of it. I parked in a good vantage spot, noting that even at this time of the morning, other cars

were in the Burger King lot, which was good, and called Mahoney on the cell phone.

"The eagle has landed," I said when he picked up. "Over."

"You don't have to say 'over,'" he said. "We're on cell phones."

"Okay, but you're taking the fun out of it. I'm here."

"I know," he sighed. "I saw you pull up. If you had flames shooting out of the tailpipe and a bullhorn screaming at four thousand decibels, it might have been a little less obvious."

"No need to thank me," I told him. "You're my best friend. So, what are you fixing over there? A bum transmission? A cranky electrical system?"

All I could see was the raised hood, but I heard a little engine noise through the phone. "Drained battery," he said. "The idiot who rented this thing decided to pull over to the side of the road and read his newspaper, turned off the car, but left the heater on."

"That's all it takes?"

"Yeah. They build an SUV the size of Sandusky, Ohio, and they put in a battery big enough to run your kid's transistor radio. And the punchline is, without the engine running . . .

". . . the heater did nothing."

"Exactly."

I'll spare you the next fifteen minutes of scintillating banter. I kept *my* engine on while watching, and at one point, with prior notification to Mahoney, walked into the Burger King, got myself a hot chocolate, and came out with a newspaper, pretending to read while downing my morning beverage.

Mahoney called back a minute later. "The battery's running," he said. "My next job is in Florham Park."

"What's the matter—they couldn't find something farther away?"

"Yeah, I guess all the cars in Cape May are running okay today. I'm out of here."

"I'm keeping my eyes open, Chief," I said.

"I'm calling in now. Let's nail this guy before he kills again," Mahoney countered. I'm pretty sure he was kidding.

The plan was for me to stay and observe until the local rep came to drive the SUV back to his dealership. If nobody came to destroy Mahoney's handiwork (he said it happened about once a day), I'd move on to Mary

Fowler's house, do some actual work, and then, time permitting, catch up with Mahoney before the kids were due home from school.

So I did what I do best: I sat, watched, and thought. Howard and family would appear at my house that night, so this could be my last chance to think for a week.

It didn't make sense that Justin Fowler would kill Michael Huston for the fun of it. Asperger kids, no matter how much they retreat from the world of human interaction, aren't by nature antisocial. Many of them *want* to have friends and a social life, but don't know how. It's an education and training issue, not a question of impossible stubbornness. Justin, new gun in hand, wouldn't kill Michael Huston just to try it out.

A blue Lexus slowed down near Mahoney's last patient, but kept going. The guy driving was talking into a cell phone, and weaved a little in his lane. He wasn't obeying the "hands-free" law recently enacted in the Garden State. I considered making a citizen's arrest, but I would have had to use my cell phone to do so, and that seemed wrong, somehow.

Meanwhile, Huston's widow was "too distraught" to talk to me, which wasn't a huge surprise. But there's distraught and there's *distraught*, if you know what I mean. It wouldn't be an awful thing to look into their marriage a bit and see how distraught she'd likely be facing life without her husband.

A top-of-the-line Honda stopped by Mahoney's car, and I sat up. But the passenger door opened, and a guy in a mechanic's jumpsuit got out, waved to the driver, and closed the door. He got into the car, started it up, and the Honda drove away. The mechanic, clearly from the nearby rental outlet, drove the SUV off the shoulder and onto the highway. Waste of time.

I put my car into reverse and backed out of my parking space, probably causing jubilation inside the Burger King. For a lousy cup of hot chocolate (and I mean that in every sense of the word), I had occupied a parking space for close to an hour.

On the way up Route One, I checked in with Mahoney. I used the "hands-free" device that's supposed to help, and while I did have to look down quite a bit to see the number I was dialing, at least the head-phone paid off by making me almost inaudible.

"How're things in Florham Park?"

"I'm still about fifteen minutes out. I take it nobody assaulted my patient." He sounded disappointed, as if everything should just happen in

the first ten minutes so he could breathe easier.

“Sorry. Your charge, recharged, is back at the shop, where someone can charge it.”

“Has anyone ever told you you were amusing?” he asked.

“As a matter of fact . . .

“They were lying.”

We agreed that, after the Fowler interview, it would be stupid for me to try to make it to Florham Park, a good forty-five minutes away. So I’d check in with Mahoney afterward.

The drive to North Brunswick took maybe twenty minutes, so it was about ten-thirty when I rang Mary Fowler’s doorbell. She didn’t expect me this time, but she was just as fast getting to the door.

“Mr. Tucker!”

“I asked you to call me Aaron, Mary. May I come in? I’d like to meet Justin, and I hear he’s home.”

Mary hesitated. “I don’t know . . .

“Mary, it’s cold out here, and I’m not great at cold.”

She smiled with one side of her mouth, and stepped aside. I walked in, and Mary closed the door, cutting off the frigid air. Why did her older, not-in-perfect-shape house retain the heat, while mine always felt like a windstorm was taking place in the living room? I guess there’s something to that insulation stuff, after all.

“I’m sorry, Aaron, but Justin isn’t expecting you, and, well, you know . . .

“I know, Mary. Preparation is everything with Asperger’s. But I’ll do my best, okay? Maybe you could tell him I’m here and get him used to the idea while I talk to Kevin for a minute.”

She looked surprised. “Kevin? Kevin’s not here.”

“I assumed he was the one who bailed Justin out.”

Mary shook her head. “I don’t know who bailed Justin out. Justin said he’d never seen the man before.”

That was a surprise. “A bondsman?”

Mary nodded. “It seems that way. But I don’t know who put up the collateral. Justin won’t tell me—he’s too afraid. And Kevin hasn’t been back home since you saw him. He might have gone back to Indiana. I don’t know what’s going on, Aaron.”

At that point, what was going on took a back seat to the noise from inside Justin Fowler's bedroom. Tearing paper, knocking on walls that could legitimately be described as "banging," and howls from someone—I assumed Justin—all came at once. The sudden explosion of sound was startling, but Mary was already heading for the door before I recovered. She reached it, but found it locked.

"Justin?"

"GO AWAY!" The voice was that of a very angry adolescent—loud, annoyed, and full of tension. More banging on the wall came with each syllable: "GO (Bang!) A- (Bang!) WAY! (Bang!)"

"I'm sorry, Aaron," she said. "If he doesn't want to talk to *me*, I don't think he'll want to talk to you."

I nodded, but asked softly, pointing to the door, "Do you mind if I try?"

She seemed surprised, but nodded. I walked to the door and knocked softly. "Justin," I said, "can I talk to you?"

The noises stopped, and a quiet, puzzled voice came through the door. "Who are you?"

"I'm Aaron Tucker. I'm a reporter. Lori Shery sent me."

A long soundless moment followed. Then the lock in the bedroom door clicked, and the door opened slowly. Mary's eyes opened wide, and Justin Fowler stuck his head through the opening in the doorway.

It was a blond head, with a large forelock of hair that he'd surely brush back with some regularity. The eyes, when they made contact with mine—which wasn't often—were blue and piercing, and the mouth was thin and serious. Even smiling, Justin Fowler would be smiling seriously—like Gregory Peck with a bleach job and Asperger's.

"You're pretty short," he said, looking me over.

"So I've been told. Can I come in?"

He looked behind himself, into the room. "It's pretty messy," he said.

"So's my whole house," I said. "I don't mind."

Justin thought about it, and still didn't look me in the eye. "Okay," he said, and let his mother and me into the room.

He wasn't kidding about the mess. The gun posters had been ripped to shreds, and those that managed to hang onto the walls were only shards of their former selves. Justin was mad, all right, and probably at guns. For a

young man with AS, having the central focus in his life turn on him like this must have been devastating.

Justin seemed nervous, watching Mary as she assessed the room. “Sorry, Mom,” he said, then looked away.

“It’s okay, honey. I understand.” Mary turned away from her son so he wouldn’t see her eyes moisten.

I decided to step in. “Justin, can you tell me why you’re here?”

His brows met in the middle and his lips pursed—Justin, it seems, had never heard such a stupid question before. “I live here,” he said, voice full of condescension.

“I mean, can you tell me how you got out of jail?”

Justin’s eyes clouded over and his voice got softer. “I got bailed out,” he said.

“Who bailed you out?”

I didn’t even get the words out of my mouth—I was still in the middle of “out”—when Justin began speaking. “Did you know that the Booth deringer is currently on display at the Ford’s Theatre National Historic Site in Washington, D.C.?”

“Justin,” I said, hoping to use some of the tactics that worked with Ethan, “look at my eyes.”

But he didn’t. He kept walking around the room in a circle and talking, louder by the second. “It is a .44-caliber single-shot, muzzle-loading, percussion cap-fired Deringer pistol manufactured by the Henry Deringer Company of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It has a black walnut stock with checkering, a barrel with an octagonal upper portion, a round lower portion, and scrollwork on the sideplates.”

“Justin,” I said, trying again. His voice was rising in pitch, too, becoming more agitated. I wasn’t doing well.

“It has an S-shaped trigger guard and the words ‘Deringer Philadela’ stamped on the lock plate and the top of the breech plug.”

This wasn’t helping. I looked to Mary, but she shook her head. “He’s avoiding you,” she said. “He doesn’t want to answer your questions.”

“No kidding.”

“Most people spell ‘Deringer’ wrong. They use two ‘r’s when they shouldn’t.” Justin was not really in the same room as us anymore, so Mary and I walked out.

Justin, carefully this time, locked the door behind us. She walked me toward the door.

“I’m sorry I upset him,” I told her.

“Don’t be,” Mary answered. “At least you got him to stop tearing up his walls.” She chuckled humorlessly.

“If he gets into a more receptive state of mind, would you call me?” I gave her a business card with my 1,600 contact possibilities on it—business land phone, cell phone, email, fax, business address, guy next door who can come call me . .

“Certainly,” she said, but I knew she considered the possibility to be remote.

“Maybe I can bring him something next time,” I said. “What does he like?” Mary opened the door for me and, as I pulled on my gloves, the cold wind caused us both to stiffen.

“Guns,” she said.

Chapter Eleven



Mahoney's next patient was close to home, in Edison, so I drove to Oak Tree Road and began watching, again to no avail. But, par for the course, Mahoney informed me via cell phone that the Florham Park car, which I hadn't gotten to, had been sabotaged.

"All it needed was a tire. Can you believe it?" Mahoney moaned. "And he slashed it in exactly the same place as the one I'd fixed. If I didn't put the flat tire in my van, I'd start to think I wasn't doing the work."

"Wow, a dead battery and a flat tire," I said. "You get all the tough repairs, don't you?"

His voice took on a professorial tone. "These are all pretty new cars. Most of them require simple repairs. In fact, tires and batteries are the most common. These are even things *you* could do."

"Touché."

"But when something big comes up, they need someone who really knows his stuff," said Mahoney, never one to take his work lightly.

I, on the other hand, did. "Bicycle Repair Man!" I shouted, re-call-ing the vintage Monty Python sketch.

A growl from the cell phone. "Very amusing."

He finished his work (a fan belt) relatively quickly, and drove off. And the result was pretty much the same as the last time—no saboteur, and no difficulty. I drove home.

Four seconds after I walked in the door, the phone rang, and naturally, it was the person I was least prepared to talk to. I checked the caller ID box, saw who it was, sighed, and picked it up.

"Hi, Glenn," I said, hopefully without a tinge of weariness in my voice.

"Mr. Tucker? This is Jackie from Mr. Waterman's office." Like most people in Hollywood, Glenn felt the need to impress everybody with how busy he was. So he had people call you and then tell him you were on the

line. That way, if you weren't there, he hadn't wasted his precious fifteen seconds dialing your number. "I have Mr. Waterman on the line for you."

"I'll try to contain my excitement."

A split second later, Glenn's voice broke through, and like most people who have someone else call you up, he felt compelled to sound surprised. "Aaron! How *are* you?"

"Wait . . . who is this? *Glenn*? My goodness! How surprising to hear your voice, after someone called up and said it'd be you!"

He snickered, but I couldn't tell if his heart was in it or not. "Okay, I get the message. Always have to shoot down the pompous, eh?"

"That's me," I said, "the old pompous-shooter." It doesn't always come out the way you want it to.

"Okay, Aaron," he said. "How far have you gotten?"

"I made it all the way through college," I offered, but I knew that wasn't what he was asking. I was stalling for time.

"You know what I mean," Glenn said. "How are the revisions going?"

There was no point. I'd have to level with him. "Great," I told him. "I think you'll be pleased." Okay, so some things are more level than others. I have the same philosophy when it comes to home repair, which is why all the shelves on my walls are slightly off.

"Terrific," Glenn gushed distractedly. "How far have you gotten?"

"How far?"

"Yes."

"How far have I gotten?"

I could sense him sitting up behind his desk, suddenly concerned. "That *was* the question, Aaron," Glenn said.

"Well . . . Come on, Tucker, you make stuff up for money—say something! "I'm not really doing it in sequence, you know. I'm fixing the little things first, then moving on to the heavy lifting."

The crinkling in the earpiece told me Waterman was relaxing back into his leather chair (PETA be damned!). "You had me worried there for a minute."

"Yeah," I said, "me too."

"How soon do you expect to be done?" he asked.

"How soon?"

"Don't start this again, Aaron," Waterman warned.

“Soon,” I said firmly. “Very soon. What’s our drop-dead date on this?”

Waterman thought for a moment. He was calculating the real deadline versus what he thought he should tell me, so I’d be done sooner, or, if I went over “deadline,” still be on time. I understand the impulse—I do it to interview subjects all the time. “I can give you a week,” he said finally.

A week! I did everything I could to avoid an audible intake of breath, then gritted my teeth and lied directly through them. “No problem,” I said. “Nothing to it.”

“Good enough,” said Glenn. “Aaron, if you want to confer with me on anything, bounce something off me, feel free. I’ll always take your call. You know that, I hope.”

“Yes, boss.”

I hung up as quickly as I could and opened the “*Minivan*” computer file for the first time since I’d arrived home. The changes Glenn wanted really weren’t all that extensive, and if I put the effort into it, I could certainly finish in time.

The phone rang. I considered not picking up, what with having all this newfound resolve and everything, but the number, from within my own area code, was one I didn’t recognize. Curiosity didn’t necessarily kill the freelance writer, but it more than likely wasn’t going to make him a lot of money, either.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Tucker, this is Arnold Rezenbach.” He waited, as if the very mention of his name usually brought awed gasps or prayers muttered under one’s breath. I was pretty sure I’d heard it before, but I couldn’t remember where. “I’m the attorney for Karen Huston,” he added, realizing I wasn’t providing an adequate amount of shaking-in-my-boots.

“Oh yeah,” I said, mostly to myself. I immediately switched into freelance reporter mode, noting with some pride how quickly gungho screenwriter mode had evaporated. If I played this right, I might be able to pave the way for eventually getting an interview with Michael Huston’s widow. “I was calling about an article I’m writing for *Snapdragon*.”

“Yes, I remember,” Rezenbach said. “I’m calling to inform you that Ms. Huston has consented to an interview.”

Damn, I’m good.

Chapter Twelve



I had an hour and a half before the kids would come home, so I rushed to Karen Huston's home in North Brunswick before she or her lawyer could change their minds. He was already there, as it turned out, having called me on the cell phone from Karen's living room. I love being dependable, while people like Rezenbach just assume you'll be available at *their* convenience.

Karen's house was lovely. A small Victorian, it had been detailed within an inch of its life by whoever painted it last, and was a tasteful combination of blue, aqua, and white, with a white railing on the wrap-around porch and plants hanging from the exposed beams on the screened-in section of the porch, insulated now by glass so the plants were actually alive and well. This contrasted with my house, where any plant that enters during any season might just as well abandon all hope.

Rezenbach answered the door himself, which surprised me. I figured he'd have minions with him, since these guys always have minions. I also figured out that one of them would handle the more mundane tasks, like opening doors. But there he was, showing off his turning and pulling skills like a real pro.

The room I entered was not atypical in this part of New Jersey. Long before television, it was built to be a living room, where people would gather, perhaps sip a little brandy, and generally wish someone would invent television so they could stop being so damn bored. Today, of course, a large-screen TV dominated the room, with a cabinet for the corresponding audio system (we used to call them "stereos" in my day, which was October 2, 1978). A sofa and two wing chairs served the god of television entertainment quietly and subserviently.

This room, while not demonstrably different than most, was, without qualification, *better*. The paint job was a little more detailed, the carpet a tad softer, the furnishings chosen and arranged more ergonomically, but with

perfect placement to create the homey-yet-elegant effect. Paintings—not framed prints, but real paintings on real canvasses—were hung on the walls in just the spots where paintings should be hung. The fireplace was brick, and designed to be warm and inviting, not spectacular and intimidating.

It was, in short, a perfect room, but not in a Martha Stewart-anal-retentive-magazine-layout sort of way. It was a room that invited you in, asked you to sit, be comfortable, enjoy yourself, and share in the entertainment offered. It was not something that shouted about its superiority, but spoke calmly about days gone by.

Normally, all that perfection would have sent me into the night screaming for my mommy, but here, somehow, it worked perfectly. I didn't want to run away at top speed.

Rezenbach, a thin, bony man who would have done well in auditions for the role of Death, merely nodded his head at me when I entered, foregoing the traditional handshake. No doubt he was worried that my sub-zero grip from the arctic winds outside would warm up his own hand too much, and he'd have to go back to his tomb to reach his natural body temperature of 23 degrees Fahrenheit.

"Mr. Tucker?" he asked, as if someone would actually *pretend* to be me. I assured him I hadn't been abducted, then replaced with an exact replica. His voice, which hadn't actually been booming to begin with, dropped to something between a whisper and a hush.

"Karen is in the bedroom," he said. "I'd like to ask you to go easy on her."

"I wasn't planning on pulling out the bright lights and the rubberhose, Mr. Rezenbach. I realize what she's been through."

Though unappreciative of the imagery, he nodded, and walked down a corridor to what must have been the master bedroom. I did not follow. From somewhere nearby, toward the entrance to the attached garage, I heard something.

Growling.

It wasn't the kind of sound that set one's mind at ease, but I didn't have the time to consider it. Rezenbach returned, holding the hand of a woman about ten years younger than I am. She was dark blonde, with a fit, athletic body, concealed in a too-formal dress that wasn't exactly black, but was pretending to be. Her eyes, normally blue, registered mostly red.

I don't know anything about murder investigations, despite having done two earlier ones. But writers, particularly those who deal in fiction, train themselves to understand human emotion. And we're usually fairly good at being able to distinguish between the genuine and the artificial. Karen Huston's grieving, which I could see from 20 feet away, fell unquestionably into the "genuine" category. She had been kicked in the gut by her husband's murder, and was just barely catching her breath.

She, however, held out a hand, and I took it gently. "Thank you for coming on such short notice, Mr. Tucker," she said in a soft, melodic voice. Karen seemed much older than her years, older than my years, even, and it was the weight of her recent suffering that wore her down. Her mouth was clearly more given to smiling.

"Thank *you* for seeing me, Mrs. Huston. And call me Aaron, please."

I sat in one of the wing chairs, clumsily removing the reporter's notebook from the back pocket of my jeans. Rezenbach, who had actually taken my coat and gloves, hung them on an elegant wooden coat rack. But, not wanting to stray too far from his client, he sat next to her on the sofa. He was—or was it my imagination?—proprietary about Karen Huston.

"I'm so sorry to be meeting you under these circumstances," I told her. I had rehearsed that line the whole drive down. Cops always say, "I'm sorry for your loss," which has become something of a cliché, and therefore has lost all its emotional meaning. This wasn't much better, but at least Jesse L. Martin didn't say it on TV every week.

"I understand," Karen said. "But I don't know why you're writing about this. Isn't it just a local matter?" She stumbled on the word "matter," as if she were first going to say "murder," but couldn't bring herself to utter the word.

"It is, and it's not," I told her. "The young man who was charged with . . . the crime has a disorder called Asperger's Syndrome. I'm examining the incident with that in mind."

Rezenbach's mouth tightened when I mentioned Justin, but Karen didn't seem to anger. She nodded slowly and looked at the coffee table. "Yes," she said. "The poor young man."

The growling got louder, and—sue me—I must have looked. I'm not used to the walls making a hostile noise when I'm in the room.

Karen turned and shouted at the wall. "Dalma! No!"

The growling ceased, replaced by whimpering. Karen looked at me, and must have seen the admiration in my eyes. “She’s really a good dog,” she said.

“I’ll say,” I told her. “I can’t get my dog to breathe on command.”

Karen smiled a little. “She misses Michael,” she said quietly, then looked up. “Do you mind . . . ?”

“Do I mind what?”

“If we let her in.” Now that the growling had stopped, it didn’t seem all that threatening a situation, so I shook my head. Karen turned to Rezenbach. “Would you let her in please?” she asked. Her lawyer wasn’t pleased about leaving his client alone with the nasty old reporter, but he acquiesced.

Karen leaned over to me quickly, knowing it wouldn’t be long before he came back with the dog. “Please don’t say anything while he’s here,” she said, indicating Rezenbach. “I shouldn’t be saying this—he doesn’t want me to—but I don’t think that young man shot Michael.”

Sure enough, before I had a chance to react, the lawyer trailed a large Dalmatian into the room. The dog was headed for Karen, but then saw me, snarled, and changed direction, toward the wing chair, which luckily was at the far end of the sofa.

Karen grabbed the dog by the collar. “No, Dalma!” she commanded. “Bad!” The dog growled a little, but sat as Karen held her. “Go to your pillow. Pillow!” The dog walked to a dog bed, still glaring at me, and lay down.

I relaxed in the chair and looked at Karen. “Can you teach me how to do that with my kids?” I asked. She chuckled lightly.

I couldn’t follow up on her comment about Justin’s innocence because Rezenbach sat down next to her again, looking into her eyes to see if confidences had been betrayed or emotional barriers broken during his 20-second absence. He looked at me with intensity. Luckily, I live with a lawyer, so intense looks don’t really have that much impact anymore. I’ve seen Abby rehearsing them.

“My client,” he announced, “will not discuss anything related to the case against the man accused of killing her husband. She will discuss her marriage and her husband’s character, so long as the questions are not so personal as to upset her. She has been through an enormously difficult time

and is still suffering great emotional pain. I will not allow you to increase that pain. Is that understood, Mr. Tucker?"

I took a long moment and studied him. "Did you practice that?" I asked. "I mean, last night, when you were getting into your pajamas, did you look in the mirror and do that speech? Because it was very convincing, really."

Rezenbach, who wasn't used to people not quivering at the sound of his voice, fumphered briefly, then regained his composure. "If you are intent on being irreverent, young man, this interview will be terminated."

"Wow. Now you sound like my fourth-grade teacher, Miss Rubinski. Did you know her?"

Karen Huston seemed not to be listening to this exchange. She was watching the dog, who was lying on the dog bed with her tongue hanging out, staring with one eye at the ceiling.

"We are not prepared to continue," said Rezenbach, and he stood, expecting Karen to follow him. She kept staring at the dog.

"Sit down, Mr. Rezenbach," I told him. "I don't intend to violate your client's privacy or ask her questions that are going to make her more upset. She doesn't know any more about the murder than the cops, and they don't mind me asking sensitive questions, since they rarely answer *any* questions. So switch to decaf and take a seat." Surprisingly, he sat. I love summoning my inner Bogart. Another minute, and I'd have been telling him to shut his "yap."

My diatribe at her lawyer seemed to snap Karen to attention— she looked at me, her eyes open, but still haunted. I knew I couldn't press her on much of anything.

"How did you meet your husband, Karen?" You always start with a softball question because it loosens the subject up and gets her into the flow of the conversation.

She smiled, but it wasn't a happy smile. "We were fixed up, believe it or not. My college roommate Pearl introduced us when I was working in the city at HBO and Michael was in the financial planning department at the charitable foundation where Pearl worked. She thought we'd hit it off, because she knew I'd been through a number of bad relationships in a row, and he seemed like the kind of guy who wouldn't hurt me."

"She was right," I suggested.

Karen nodded. “Yes, she certainly was. Michael was devoted to me from the day we met. He actually proposed on our first date, and I had to hold him off for three months.”

“But he wore you down, finally.” You don’t want to put words in the subject’s mouth so much as lead them in a direction and see if you’re right. If you’re not, they’ll tell you.

This time, I wasn’t wrong. Karen nodded again. “Yes,” she said chuckling. “He wore me down. How could you not give in to a man that open and—” She sniffled and stopped herself mid-sentence. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, Karen. You’re doing fine.”

Rezenbach considered saying something lawyerly, but I cast a glance in his direction, and the memory of my Sam Spade impersonation came back to him. He decided to let it go, for now. Even we little folk can be intimidating when we’re sitting down.

Karen Huston composed herself, but it was an effort, and it certainly wasn’t an act. I knew the more difficult questions were on their way, and this doesn’t happen often, but I was starting to wonder whether they were worth asking.

“All I can tell you, Aaron, is that no woman ever felt more secure in a relationship than I did with Michael. He loved me no matter what, and that is a very comforting feeling.”

I took a deep breath. “Can you think of anyone who would want to hurt Michael?”

Rezenbach’s eyes became the size of Eggo waffles—the apple cinnamon kind, which is all Ethan will eat. “Mr. Tucker!” Rezenbach barked.

The corner of Karen’s mouth curled in a strange way, almost like a snarl. The dog’s head rose off the pillow and she stared at Karen.

“It’s all right,” she said quietly.

Rezenbach turned his head to look at her, caught her glance, and sat down. They clearly had a bond that went beyond lawyer-client, but I had a hard time picturing them as lovers. I had a hard time picturing Rezenbach and *anyone* as lovers.

Karen turned back to me, measuring each word carefully. “I’m sorry, Aaron, but no. I can’t think of anyone who would want to . . . I mean, it just doesn’t make sense. That poor young man must have just done it

because . . . She gestured with her hands a couple of times, but didn't say anything else.

I snuck a peek at Rezenbach, who was poised like a cobra about to strike. But there was no way around it. "Was there any trouble in your marriage, Karen?" Even as I said it, I regretted it.

Rezenbach wouldn't be denied this time—he again leapt to his feet, but Karen was faster. She feverishly shook her head "no," burst into tears, and stood, waving her hand and walking out of the room in the direction in which she had come, toward her bedroom—the bedroom where memories of her husband, whom I had just suggested she might have been cheating on, would haunt her until she left this home behind.

"I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry," she kept saying, but she was gone before I could say the same to her. Rezenbach, fire shooting from his pupils, glared at me, clamped his teeth shut, and pointed to the front door.

"This interview is terminated," he hissed, following his client. "Let yourself out."

I started toward the coat rack, but the dog growled again. She stood up and glared in my direction, making that low sound in her throat. It took me a few minutes to get out the door. Sam Spade had long since left the building.

Chapter Thirteen



“Justin Fowler is a nice kid,” said Ted Mitchell, owner of Brunswick Sporting Goods. “He’s the best employee I ever had.”

“Sporting goods,” in this case, meant mostly guns and gun accessories. Mitchell, a man in his sixties with a white goatee, was in the store alone until I arrived. He didn’t seem terribly concerned, but once I mentioned Justin’s name, Ted became downright effusive.

“He’s been working here four years,” he said of Justin. “Before that, he’d hang around here for long stretches, but never bought a thing, I was going to chase him away, but when we got into a conversation about the guns in the store, he knew more than I did. I offered him the job right then and there.”

“Do you deal in the kind of gun they found in Justin’s room? Did he get it from here?”

“No, sir,” Mitchell said forcefully, as if I’d accused him of a crime. “That kind of thing, with no serial number and no traceable elements, is something you buy at a gun show, not in a store like this. In New Jersey, it’d be against the law for me to sell that kind of gun.” Okay, so I *had* accused him of a crime.

“Any idea where Justin got it?”

Mitchell looked me straight in the eye and said, “If Justin says he found it in his room, then he found it in his room. That kid don’t lie, ever. If he says it dropped from heaven, then that’s where it came from. No question.”

“I’m not questioning Justin’s honesty, believe me, Mr. Mitchell,” I said. “I’m just trying to figure out what happened.”

“Well, I don’t know where the weapon came from,” he said. “He didn’t get it here.” He was calming down a little. The last thing I needed was to get a man angry at me in a huge room full of firearms.

“Have any of your customers talked to Justin about a gun like that or asked him about it . . . that he told you?”

Mitchell shook his head, but there was something he didn’t want to tell me. “No,” he said. “Nobody’s asked Justin about that kind of a gun, at least not that he mentioned to me, and not that I’ve heard them ask.”

I bit a little harder on my upper lip, trying to phrase the next question properly. “Did any of your customers ask you about that kind of gun? Someone you had to turn away, maybe?”

He seemed to be very careful about looking me in the eye as he answered. “No, none of my customers asked me about a replica weapon like that one,” he said. “Not one.”

The jousting was getting a little tiresome. “Has *anyone* been in here asking about a gun like that? Come on, Mr. Mitchell. I think we both want to help Justin.”

“I *am* helping Justin,” Mitchell said. “And if you want to talk any further about this, you can call my lawyer.”

There wasn’t much room left for negotiation, so I checked my watch, made noises about how late I was (which was true), and headed out the door. I beat the kids home by about ten minutes, which is the last sentence you’ll ever read from me that starts with “I beat the kids”. . unless we’re talking about a game of “Trivial Pursuit,” in which I’m a merciless competitor. Ask a freelancer about trivial stuff, and you’re bound to strike gold.

Ethan wasn’t any less surly than usual, and no more so, and when a boy is about to become a teenager, that’s really the most you can expect. He did his homework, grumbling, and showed it to me, with even more grumbling, but without the four-alarm meltdown we’d had the day before. Some days, that’s good enough.

Leah, anticipating the arrival of her relatives, was less effervescent than usual, but seemed to know she stood a decent chance of getting a present out of the visit. Knowing her uncle Howard, I was willing to bet it’d be a swell bag of peanuts with “Continental Airlines” printed on one side, but perhaps I was projecting just a bit.

Just before I was going to start making dinner, Lori Shery called. I filled her in on my monumental lack of progress with Justin Fowler, and she, being Lori, expressed her concern that she’d asked me too big a favor.

“I’ve asked you to do something that’s impossible,” she said.

“You expect it because you do impossible things three times a week,” I reminded her.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” she asked. Lori should have that put on a business card, or have a tape loop made of her saying it, to cut down on needless repetition.

“Talk to some doctors,” I said, knowing that “no, I can handle it” would have been unacceptable to Lori. “Psychologists, neurologists, people like that. Give them the details of the case as you understand it, and see if they can poke any holes in the theory that Justin shot Michael Huston just because he was the first guy he encountered. The more experts we have, the better off we are. And if you get any good ones, tell them I’ll be calling to do an interview.”

Lori already sounded more upbeat now that she had an assignment. I’m the same way, but I generally get paid when I have an assignment. “Anything else, boss?” she asked.

“You don’t know any gun experts, do you?” I asked her.

“No, but you do,” she said. “Justin Fowler. You know you can ask him anything about guns, and you’ll have a hard time getting him to stop. He is one of our children, after all.”

“I wish you wouldn’t say it quite like that,” I said. “Abby gets jealous so easily.”

“Right.”

Abigail hadn’t known exactly when Howard and his entourage (pardon me, *family*) would be showing up, so I made enough dinner for four of us, since a) I assumed they’d eat on the plane, b) I knew the correct proportions for four people, and was at best questionable as a chef and c) I didn’t really care whether Howard ate or not.

It occurred to me at this point that it was possible I wasn’t entering the week-to-come with the proper attitude. I didn’t really care about that, either, I decided.

But Abby did, and if there’s one thing on this earth I do care about, it’s her. So I’d have to at least make the best attempt I could to get along with her brother—right after dinner.

On a day like today, any excuse to turn on the oven would do, so I made a meat loaf, which with my level of expertise, was basically a large, baked

hamburger. Put some mashed potatoes on it, and it's a Shepherd's Pie. Just in case, I tossed some potatoes into a pot with water and put it on the stove. Never let it be said I didn't make an effort.

Ethan had long since ascended to PlayStation Heaven and Leah was in the living room listening to a Harry Potter book on her Walk-person. We'd borrowed the audiobook from the library, since Leah liked the way the man reading the book changed his voice for each character. She was laughing out loud when Warren stood up, walked to the front door, and started to whimper at the top of his admittedly low-to-the-ground lungs. The dog can tell when Abby's car is two blocks away. I don't know if it's the particular sound of a company-issued Buick or the general Abby-ness of the sound, but he's as much in love with her as I am, and someday, I may need to find a way to shove him aside. That's all I need—furry, adorable competition.

I was actually mashing potatoes when the door opened and Abby walked in, looking expectantly around the room, and finding only Leah in the thrall of Hogwarts, oblivious to the Muggle world.

"They're not here yet," I told her as she took off her scarf, coat, gloves, and probably a couple of sweaters until she started to look more like my wife and less like a land formation.

"Have they called?"

"Don't they still charge for making cellular phone calls from planes?" I countered.

She gave me a look. "That's not much of an effort, Aaron," she warned.

I sighed, something I don't do very often. Usually, I groan. "You're right," I said. "I'll try harder."

"I know it's not easy," she said, touching my cheek. "But for me, okay?"

"Oh sure, don't play fair."

She went upstairs to change into something more comfortable—no, really—and came downstairs in a sweatshirt, sweatpants, and a couple of pairs of socks. In our house, it's sometimes hard to remember that we are, in fact, indoors.

As I ladled potatoes atop the meat loaf for oven browning, she asked, "What's for dinner?"

I showed her. "Shepherd's Pie."

Her brow furrowed a little. “That’s a large hamburger with mashed potatoes on it.”

“Nigella Lawson doesn’t have to put up with this kind of abuse,” I reminded her.

“No, but you don’t look as good as she does in a low-cut blouse,” said my wife.

“I should hope not.”

She took another look at the Corning dish I was about to put back in the oven. “Are you sure that’s enough?” Abby asked.

“I have no idea,” I replied. “It depends on when Stein, party of three, shows up.”

Abby walked to the refrigerator and began taking out things to supplement my cooking in case seven people, and not four, were sitting down to dinner. Luckily, most of the items removed were of the vegetable family, and therefore officially not my responsibility. In my house, we respect each other’s limitations. Abby, of course, doesn’t have any.

In what seemed like mere moments, she had put together something she called a “frittata,” which any vegetarian would certainly appreciate. Warning me that “it doesn’t really go with meat loaf,” she added, “It’s there for backup.”

I thought, “Cool. More meat loaf for us.” When life hands you lemons . . .

Abby put off dinner as long as she could, but when the children started to chew on sofa cushions, she had to give in. And so, we were only halfway through eating when the doorbell rang and the dog, bless him, began to growl.

My wife leapt to her feet as if an electrical charge ripped through her shapely little butt. The only times I’ve ever seen Abby nervous have been when she was dealing with her family—and when she thought someone was going to kill me.

She practically sprinted to the front door, much to Leah’s chagrin. Leah always wants to answer the door, and the phone, except when it’s for her. Abby flung the door open, and allowed the Angel of Death—pardon me, her brother Howard—into our home.

I’m pretty sure it was a complete coincidence that a gust of wind blew into the house and the lights in the living room flickered.

I stood slowly, since I was deep into comfort food at the time, and put on my most diplomatic face to confront my brother-in-law, sister-in-law, and nephew-in-law. Dylan, who had clearly signed a pact with Satan, was tall and thin, handsome like his father (who did, after all, share Abigail's genes), and bore the confident smile of someone who always, *always* got what he wanted. I offered a hand to Howard, who is the least Jewish Jew I've ever met, and he took it. He smiled, exposing exactly the right number of teeth. I considered knocking some of them out, but was unsure whether I could reach the uppers without a step-stool.

"How's it going, Howard?" See how diplomatic I was being? Keep that in mind if I call you as a witness.

"Aaron," he said. It didn't answer the question, but did indicate he still remembered my name. His tone of voice, no matter how little he tried to hide it, indicated he'd have been just as happy—if not happier—if he could forget it.

His wife Andrea is not Jewish, and normally, that wouldn't make any difference to me at all, but because she was with Howard, I had decided to resent her for her poor choice in men. She was so blond it was painful to look directly at her without Polarized lenses, and so thin she almost disappeared when viewed in profile. Surely she had been a cheerleader in high school and a sorority sister in college—the *shiksa* of Howard's dreams. According to rumor, she had managed to make it through childbirth without breaking a sweat, and was back on the tennis court later the same day. But since I had started that rumor myself, I discounted it as coming from an unreliable source.

She leaned down in order to peck at the air near my left ear. This was an unexpected outpouring of pure emotion for Andrea, and I took it for the empty gesture it was intended to be. "So good to see you," she said. I showed remarkable restraint, I thought, in not asking whether that remark indicated some trouble with her vision and her relief that she could make me out.

"You, too," I said nonsensically. Howard gave Abby a light hug, and Leah, who would have actually lit sparklers and tap danced if she thought she'd get some attention, walked up and solemnly shook Howard's hand.

"Hello, Uncle Howard," she said. "Remember me? I'm Leah." She had seen Howard at Passover, maybe eight months earlier, but Leah knows how

to play a room. Howard actually smiled. He shook her hand in the exaggerated way adults think endears them to children, but is actually condescending, and the kids know it.

“Hi, Leah,” Howard said in a singsong voice that went nicely with the handshake. “How old are you now?”

“Nine,” she told him with an edge to her voice. Surely everyone knew she was nine. Leah also started to surreptitiously cast a glance around the room. No bags. Did this mean no presents?

“Nine!” exploded my brother-in-law. “You’ve gotten so big!” Apparently, he was determined to use all the little-kid clichés in his first five minutes here.

“Where’s Ethan?” asked Andrea. On the way from the airport, she clearly had studied up on her nephew’s name.

Ethan, of course, was in the kitchen, having seen no reason to get up from dinner just because everyone else had. He expected, and quite correctly, that sooner or later this crowd would wander in to where he was seated, so there was no urgency about getting up to meet them. Having Asperger’s can have its advantages.

Abby was also confused about the lack of luggage, though, unlike Leah, she wasn’t expecting a present. She seemed to be living out a premonition—after fourteen years of marriage, you pick up these things.

“Where are your bags, Howard?” she asked.

Howard hit himself in the forehead, exaggerating the gesture to the point that Bugs Bunny would have been embarrassed. “That’s right!” he bellowed. “They’re still in the rental car.” He turned to me—and here, predictably, it came. “My back’s stiff from the flight. Would you mind, Aaron?” He handed me the little beeper thing that does everything for a rental car but drive it home for you.

“Of course not,” I said, taking the key gizmo with just a little too much force. I shot Abby a glance quite unlike the usual glance I shoot her, and her eyes asked me to cut Howard some slack because she and he had emerged from the same womb. It was a womb to which I owed a great deal, so I smiled badly and headed for the door.

As I said, when you’re married for fourteen years, you pick up a lot of things—like your brother-in-law’s baggage.

Chapter Fourteen



Unsurprisingly, Howard and his family (for lack of a more descriptive term) had *not* eaten dinner, and, without having made a reservation or anything, expected us to feed them. Honestly!

It took about ten minutes to clear everything off the kitchen table (I did that), apologize for not being prepared to eat in the dining room (that was Abby), put in the extra table leaf (me again), put everything back on the table (me and Abby), set out plates, utensils, and glasses for the newcomers (Leah), and complain about the interruption to dinner (Ethan).

The Steins, Abigail excepted, turned up their noses at the Shepherd's Pie, apparently never having been shepherds, and opted for Abby's contribution to dinner, which demonstrated their good taste. Conversation was generally about the flight, which apparently had been awful, since they'd already seen the movie, and all family members couldn't have aisle seats.

If Ethan noticed the sly shots Dylan was taking at him throughout the meal, he didn't react. And since Ethan reacts to things that aren't even there, I have to assume he didn't notice. But I did, and it took some self-restraint not to inform my nephew that taking unnecessary shots at my son was my job, not his. Abby noticed, too, but uncharacteristically for her, let the snide comments go unchallenged.

Leah, life of the party, did her very best to keep everything on a cheerful level, but wasn't all that interested in the Tale of the Travelers from Minnesota, particularly since it was, in my estimation, the Dullest Story Ever Told. She asked to be excused shortly after we resumed dinner, and was permitted to go into the living room and listen to some more of her book.

By the time Ethan went up to his room for additional thumb exercise, and Dylan, rolling his eyes at the low-tech level of video game systems

around here, reluctantly followed, dinner was pretty much a thing of the past. But we adults, fighting our natural impulses, decided to sit at the table a while longer and pretend to have a civil conversation.

As soon as the boys had gone upstairs, out of earshot, Andrea put on her best “concerned” look and stared into my eyes. “So,” she intoned with great import, “how is Ethan doing?” I think she would have actually taken my hand to show her concern, but that would require touching another person, and such a thing isn’t imprinted on Andrea’s DNA. On nights when I’m despairing of life in general, I ponder how Dylan came to be without his mother ever having to touch another human.

“He’s doing fine,” I said breezily. “How’s Dylan doing?”

“Dylan is a winner,” his father bombasted. “Top five in his class, captain of the soccer team . . .

But that wasn’t the way Andrea wanted the conversation to go. “No, really,” she said, her voice exhibiting such concern I wondered if she was auditioning to take over for Sally Struthers on “send-money-for-the-children” infomercials. “How is Ethan doing, *really*?”

You get this a lot from people who have no idea what Asperger’s is, nor who my son has become. They think of the poor afflicted child and wonder if he can actually get himself dressed in the morning. They try to show their pity by disguising it as concern.

“He’s doing fine,” I said with a touch more purpose. “*Really*.”

Andrea looked disappointed. Clearly, I wasn’t sharing my pain sufficiently, but since I didn’t have all that much pain, I felt it was necessary to horde what I had. Call me greedy.

Abby, who was placing a ridiculously rich chocolate cake on the table, saved my butt (as usual). “We’ve seen a lot of progress with Ethan the past few years,” she said. “He’s doing very well at school, and he’s made some friends.” Okay, he *is* doing very well at school, and he has one friend—kind of.

Asperger kids are not what you’d call social butterflies—their entire mental makeup is geared away from doing what everyone else does. If you had a “weird kid” in your class growing up, there’s a decent chance he or she had AS, and didn’t know it. I now realize I had one in my class, and sometimes I feel like Ethan is my penance for the way we treated that kid.

But my son is teaching me more about acceptance and diversity than a twenty-year stint in sensitivity training ever could.

“That’s so wonderful,” Andrea cooed. “It’s what we’ve prayed for.”

Oh, please. First of all, I’m an agnostic. That means I don’t believe in God, but I’m afraid to say so out loud in case He’s listening. Although people praying for me or my son is a nice gesture, it’s not necessarily an example of time well spent. And the only thing Andrea and Howard ever prayed for, in my humble opinion, was phenomenal growth in their 401(k) plan. On a good day, they might be able to remember Ethan’s name.

Still, I held my tongue (and if you’re expecting the inevitable “gross and slippery” joke, I must refer you elsewhere). I tried to picture myself somewhere more sedate and calming, like the Port Authority Bus Terminal on 42nd Street. It was little comfort.

“Thank you,” my diplomatic wife said. “It’s been a lot of hard work for Ethan, but he really is doing much—”

At that exact moment (I swear), a rather bloodcurdling scream came from upstairs. It wasn’t from either of my children, I could tell, so it didn’t really worry me, but I did rifle through my memory banks to recall if I had, in fact, paid up that month’s homeowner’s insurance premium.

Howard and Andrea, however, reacted more violently. They stood up as one, and waited but a single fateful moment before racing upstairs. By then, there was no reason to move.

Dylan was already running down the stairs, clutching his left hand in his right. Something approximating a real emotion—anger— was stamped across his face. From Ethan’s room, I could hear a fullblown Asperger meltdown rattling the house’s foundation.

“What is *wrong* with that kid?” Dylan yelled at his parents. “The little bastard *bit* me!”

Chapter Fifteen



“I’ll bet he had it coming,” I said.

Abby stared at me. After the standard brouhaha over Dylan’s hand, which was not, so far as I could tell, damaged, Ethan was brought down for recriminations, public scenes, extremely forced apologies, and threats of punishment to be carried out at a later date (and, in all likelihood, forgotten).

Three hours later, Abby and I were getting ready for bed. Normally, we start by making the bed, but Abby had been so edgy about “anyone seeing the way we live,” she had actually made the bed within an inch of its life that morning. I was having trouble freeing the sheet from its tight corner—the woman has some muscle on her.

I had shed my forty-six layers of clothing, since the upstairs in our house is almost literally the polar opposite of the downstairs. If any heating device is used anywhere in the house, the temperature on our second floor goes up to 106 degrees Fahrenheit and stays that way until May, when it goes down to 98, where it stays all summer.

Personally, I was taking comfort in the fact that Howard and Andrea were sleeping in our basement, where no matter how hard the furnace pumps, you can see your breath during the winter.

““He had it coming?”” Abby said, incredulous. “Our son bites another child on the hand because he felt his cousin wasn’t playing a video game correctly, and you say he had it *coming*? Please tell me you were joking, Aaron.”

“All right, so maybe I was exaggerating.” I wasn’t in a charitable mood. I was contemplating a week’s worth of Howard in the flesh, we’d barely gotten Ethan under control before Dylan had rolled out his sleeping bag a foot from Ethan’s bed, and I hadn’t gotten anywhere with Justin Fowler.

Being nice to my brother-in-law was like sucking in my gut to look more appealing: it had little effect, and felt so good when I stopped.

Abby, resplendent in flannel pajamas despite the tropical climate in our bedroom, wasn't letting go easily. "That was no way to get off on the right foot, and you weren't helping, Aaron."

"Sure I was helping. I stopped Ethan from biting him again, didn't I?"

She started brushing her hair in a way that made it look so luxuri-ous, I was thinking of moving in and living there for a while. My wife can soften my mood by diverting my attention, which isn't all that hard to do.

I walked over to her and put my hands on her shoulders. She stopped brushing, and her hair cascaded onto the backs of my hands in a very pleasing manner.

"I don't want to fight," I told her, and put my arms around her back. I kissed Abby and felt her respond. She pulled me a little closer and kissed back most satisfactorily. So I moved my hands a little.

"Aaron," she said softly, "we have *company* in the house." She moved my hands back. I exhaled and dropped them entirely.

"Please tell me you're kidding," I said. "Is this the way it's going to be for a week—because your brother and his wife are two floors below us? I hold no illusions about my prowess, honey. I couldn't make you scream *that* loud."

We separated and I walked back to my side of the bed, shaking my head. Another man—one with an ounce of sense—would have left it at that, but no one has ever accused me of being so sensible.

"You know," I told Abigail, "you're overreacting to this whole thing."

She sat down on the bed, clearly upset. "I'm overreacting because we're not having sex tonight? You're getting all testosterone on me, Aaron."

I turned to face her. "That's not what I'm talking about at all. I barely recognize your behavior today. You're putting on a show for your brother about how orderly and organized a family we are. If it were anyone else, you'd have at least entertained the possibility that Ethan was provoked, but you wouldn't hear it about Dylan, because if you did, you'd be risking having to tell your brother that he's not the essence of perfection he thinks he is."

"You think it's okay for Ethan to bite his cousin because he didn't play a video game right? Whose behavior are we talking about here, Aaron?"

“Yours,” I said. “I agree that Ethan did something really, really wrong tonight, but we never even got to *discussing* what set him off. You know as well as I do that Dylan baits him, and Ethan’s hardly well equipped to deal with it. We’re supposed to help him. But instead, you were so busy kowtowing to your brother that you weren’t willing to stand up for your son.”

Her voice dropped an octave and her eyes narrowed. “Aren’t you the one who told him his punishment would be no PlayStation for three days? Aren’t you the one who got red in the face yelling at him? You can’t blame all this on me because you don’t like my brother, Aaron.”

“So you’re being reasonable and I’m the one with a chip on my shoulder?” I said. “You haven’t changed the way you’re acting at all? You’re not distracted?”

“No.”

“Then why did you forget to walk the dog tonight?” Abby walks the dog after dinner practically every night. It’s a daily ritual that she actually enjoys doing. Forgetting to walk Warren is tantamount to for-getting her husband’s name, something Abby probably wished she could do right then.

She stared at me for a long moment, then stood up and walked to the closet. “You might have said something before,” she said.

I stood up and put on my pants. “I forgot myself until this moment,” I told her. “Abby . . .

She looked at me. “What?”

“I’ll go. I’m faster than you, and it’s late.”

I had most of my clothes on, and she hadn’t taken anything out of the closet yet. “No,” she said. “I wouldn’t want you to feel like I’ve forced you to do something you didn’t *want* to do.”

“*Neither would I.*” I put on my shoes and walked out. But first, I reached into my top dresser drawer and pulled out a small plastic bag.

Passing by Leah’s room, I looked in and saw the little feet, sticking out from under her blanket and still moving around.

“Little girl?”

She sat up. She hadn’t been crying, but no matter how much Leah and Ethan battle each other, she hates it when he gets into trouble. Leah loves her brother, and feels that any punishment of him should come from her.

I reached into the bag and pulled out the small stuffed horse I had bought the day before. “This is for you,” I said, handing it to my daughter.

“Horsey!” she said in what she calls her “Baby Leah” voice. It is deliberate exaggeration for effect. “What’s it for, Daddy?”

“It’s because you deserve it,” I said. “You’re a good girl, a good daughter, a good sister, and a good *niece*.” She nodded, understanding what I was saying.

“Thank you, Daddy,” she said. Leah held out her arms, and gave me one of her therapeutic hugs. But this was a rare occasion where it didn’t take.

Outside in four sweatshirts, a coat, gloves, and a hood (I look stupid in hats), I walked Warren to the corner, and turned left toward the park.

Edison Park, named after the guy who made it possible to see Edison Park this late at night, closes after dark. The irony makes it foolish to walk around down there at this hour. So I stuck to the streets, waiting for Warren to remember the purpose of the walk.

I’m not often angry with Abby, and I don’t enjoy it. Worse, she was angry with me, and I *hate* that. But she was being unreasonable, I thought, and I hadn’t stepped out of line pointing that out. Isn’t a good marriage supposed to be based on honest communication? Don’t they tell you that in all the sitcoms?

I wasn’t going to apologize. I hadn’t done anything wrong. Okay, so maybe she was just trying to reach out to her brother, realizing that their relationship hadn’t always been all that warm, and she wanted to improve that. But I felt she was reaching out at the expense of her family, and it was okay to raise that possibility. Wasn’t it?

On the other hand, was this actually about her not wanting to make love while they were in the house? Was I really that petty? Okay, sure, so I was that petty. And maybe some of it had to do with the fact that I can’t stand her brother, who acts as if I’m a mistake his sister should have corrected years ago. So maybe I was reacting to that.

But I wasn’t going to apologize for it.

At that moment, a hand, palm flat, hit me smack on the shoulder. I was so lost in my Talmudic musings I hadn’t even noticed the three men standing on the sidewalk under a bare tree—a very unusual sight in this

neighborhood at this time of night. They were wearing matching parkas, with fur-lined hoods, like Elliot Gould wore in M*A*S*H.

“Tucker,” the one with the palm said. He was the smallest, only about five inches taller than me.

I blinked. In this cold, without my contact lenses in, it was hard to see their faces in the hoods. There were three of them—big, bigger, and biggest—and based on the gravelly voice, this one had been gargling less with the Listerine and more with the glass bottle it came in.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know you,” I said. “I don’t have my glasses on, and . . .

“It’s okay,” said Bigger. “We know *you*.” I didn’t like the way that sounded.

“Really? Who’s *we*?” No sense acting scared. Of course, in this case, I wouldn’t have been acting, but still.

“We want you to stop asking questions about the guy in North Brunswick,” Big said. “It’s none of your business.”

“I’m a reporter,” I said. “Whatever they tell me to ask about is my business.”

Big looked at Bigger in disbelief and laughed. “You don’t understand,” he said. “You’re not being asked—you’re being told. Stop asking about the guy in North Brunswick.”

I looked over at Biggest, who had neither moved nor spoken. “I really can’t see that well,” I said to Bigger. “Is he alive?”

“Do you want to *stay* alive?” Bigger answered.

“What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?” I screamed, hoping someone would call the cops about the noise. “Who are you to tell me what I can and can’t do? *Why* should I stop reporting on Michael Huston’s murder?”

Big nodded, acknowledging the question. “Because Mr. Shapiro doesn’t like it,” he said.

Mr. Shapiro! I kept up the brave front, although I had to pretend my hands were shaking from the cold.

“And who’s this Mr. Shapiro?” I asked, outwardly unconcerned. So what if my intestines had gone liquid.

“Don’t waste my time,” Bigger said. He reached into his pocket.

“Don’t shoot me,” I said. “With all these clothes on, it would just be a waste of a good bullet.”

“Is that what you think? That we’re gonna shoot you?” Big looked serious, as if he were considering the idea. But his hand came out of his pocket with a piece of hard candy, which he struggled to unwrap with his gloves on. Nice work, Tucker, suggesting your own demise to three woolly mammoths in the dark.

“Be very careful about sudden movements,” I said. “This dog doesn’t like it when people threaten me.”

They took a look at Warren’s little beagle face and long basset ears, and laughed—except Biggest.

“Don’t let his appearance fool you,” I said. “He’s vicious. Bit three mailmen . . . yesterday.”

They laughed louder. Maybe I could humor them into letting me live. Visions of Leah crying at my funeral didn’t make me feel very comical.

“You’re kidding, right?” said Bigger. “That’s a toy dog.” He bent his knees to pet Warren.

Warren, to his everlasting salvation and my amazement, growled and snapped at Bigger’s hand. Bigger recoiled with astonishment and stood up. “Hey . . . he said.

Warren growled louder, and barked, baring his teeth. I couldn’t believe it.

“Nobody’s getting hurt,” said Big. “We had a message to deliver, and we delivered it. That’s all.”

“So you don’t mind if I take my dog home now?”

“Course not,” said Big. “Nobody means no harm.” I started to walk Warren past the three men.

“Just remember what we said,” Bigger reminded me.

As I passed Biggest, I looked over my shoulder at him. “Keep it down,” I told him. “People around here are trying to sleep.”

Warren and I double-timed it home, although he had to stop to do what a walk is for about half a block from the house. I made it all the way into the house before I did the same.

I crept silently into our bedroom and closed the door as quietly as I could, but as I climbed into bed (after leaving my Admiral Byrd outfit in the bathroom), Abby stirred and put her hand on my shoulder.

I took her into my arms and held her tight. “I’m sorry,” I said.

Chapter Sixteen



There were just two more school days before the kids started “Winter Break,” which we used to call by its real name, “Christmas Vacation.” Separation of church and state being what it is in this country, it’s okay to have Christmas trees in municipal buildings, and to sing all about the birth of Jesus in public schools, but you’d better not call it “Christmas Vacation.” Maybe it’s me.

I knew there were two days left before Winter Break because Ethan had made a point of walking into the kitchen every morning for the past two weeks and, in a loud, clear voice, announcing exactly how many days were left until Winter Break. Today was no exception.

I was making lunches for Leah and Ethan—making Ethan’s lunch consists of taking the proper pre-packaged ingredients and putting them in a lunch bag—when he marched in without greeting and called out “ten more hours!”

“It’s two days,” I corrected.

“Ten hours *in school*,” he said, correcting my correction. Apparently, last night’s tussle had faded into the recesses of his memory, and he was back to a jaunty mood. He hadn’t noticed Dylan sitting at the kitchen table, drinking organic orange juice that Abby had bought special, to Howard’s specifications.

“Ten hours,” Dylan chirped, aping Ethan’s high-pitched voice. I shot a dark look in Dylan’s direction, and he gazed innocently at me, as if someone else had been mocking my son. Before she left for work, Abby had again asked me to hold my feelings in check with the visiting Steins, and therefore avoid any possible strains on *her* feelings. People who work outside the home are cowards. I didn’t react verbally to Dylan.

Howard and Andrea strode out through the basement door while I was putting the kids’ lunches into their backpacks. After all, it was after seven in

the morning, they were on vacation, and they were sleeping in. They were fully dressed, and my guess was that the basement was neater now than it had been in months. I went upstairs to see if Leah, who actually had to *be* somewhere at eight, was out of bed yet.

She was in the bathroom brushing her teeth, so I went back downstairs and into the kitchen. Ethan had poured himself some cereal and was eating it, as usual without milk. Dylan, who clearly considered this scandalous, watched wide-eyed while his parents drank the coffee Abby had made for them. I avoid coffee, mostly because it tastes like raw sewage, so I'm bad at brewing the stuff. I'm told coffee drinkers can taste a difference.

Ethan wasn't looking in Dylan's direction, so he didn't see the stares. This, naturally, frustrated Dylan, so he decided to bring his astonishment out into the open.

"You eat cereal without milk?" His voice rose about half an octave.

Ethan, wondering if eating dry cereal was something he shouldn't do, looked into the bowl, then back at Dylan, and nodded. "Yeah. I like it that way."

"How can you *do* that?"

I looked over at him. Suppressing the fury I badly wanted to express, I said evenly, "Dylan . . .

Howard looked up from the *New York Times* I was supposed to be reading. "He's just exhibiting a healthy curiosity, Aaron," he said. But Andrea, doing her best to be tolerant of the "afflicted" boy, shook her head sadly.

"He's not being sensitive," she told her husband.

Ethan was now confused about his breakfast, which is the last thing he needed. He stood and poured the remainder of his cereal into the garbage can under the sink. I clamped my jaws shut, and Ethan, knowing the next step in the morning ritual, headed for the kitchen counter, where his Ritalin is kept.

My son takes fifteen milligrams of Ritalin before school every morning, and another ten after lunch at school. It helps him focus on his schoolwork, smoothes his moods, and generally makes it easier for him to get through the day. Even within the Asperger community, there's considerable debate about the benefit of Ritalin, but for my kid, it makes a beneficial difference. If you think Ritalin's bad, I suggest you don't give it to your kid.

I took the pills out of the separate bottles (one ten milligram tablet, one five) and handed them to Ethan, who had already poured himself a little orange juice. Now, Dylan was practically hemorrhaging from amazement.

“Are you *sick*?” he asked Ethan in an exaggerated voice. “Are you *contagious*?”

“All right,” I said. “That’s enough.”

Andrea walked over to her fifteen-year-old son, put an arm around his broad shoulder, and talked to Dylan like he had just discovered a man was making Elmo move. “Remember what we told you about Ethan,” she said soothingly. “He just needs a little help with his . . . *condition*.”

“Oh, please!” I said. I couldn’t stand it anymore. “His *condition*? What is he, pregnant?”

Howard frowned at this outpouring of messy emotion. “Really, Aaron,” he said, “is this necessary?” If only he’d been smoking a pipe, the effect would have been perfect. And wearing a captain’s hat, that would have been good, too.

I ignored him, which came naturally to me, and walked over to Dylan. “Ethan is fine,” I told him. “There’s *nothing* wrong with Ethan. The meds help him concentrate, and I guarantee you, six kids in every one of your classes take higher doses and act up more.”

Ethan, to his credit, shrugged off the whole thing and was heading for the door about the time Leah came downstairs. We bid Ethan a good day as he donned a sweatshirt with a hood, the only outerwear he will tolerate, to protect himself against the frigid weather. He’d be a half hour early for school, but luckily, on a day like today, they let the kids wait inside the school.

Leah and I have a routine we do every morning, where she finishes brushing her hair (a long and intricate process), then comes and sits in my lap in my office chair and tells me a riddle. I wasn’t sure if she’d be interested in doing that today, with people watching, and sure enough, she didn’t make a move toward me after the Brushing of the Hair had been completed.

As he pored over the Business Section, Howard, I could tell, was itching to discuss my awful breach of conduct with his son (or rather, to explain to me how I was wrong), but wasn’t willing to talk to me about that with others present. I was becoming something of an underground success

—everybody wanted to talk to me, but they didn't want anyone else to know it.

Andrea, unfortunately, had no such compunction. When I retreated to my office, she followed me in and hissed in a low voice, "You shouldn't get so angry, Aaron. Dylan is just curious."

"Don't confuse curiosity with maliciousness, Andrea. He wants to get a rise out of Ethan, and I'm not going to allow it. Ethan has a rough enough time getting through the day without provocation before he leaves the house."

"I know you think I'm just an airhead, but I'm not," she replied. "I'm trying to be understanding."

"I don't think you're an airhead," I told her. "I think you're unwilling to see the flaws in your own son, and so you concentrate on what you see as the flaws in mine, and you rationalize your behavior by pretending to worry about Ethan. Ethan doesn't need your sympathy—he needs a little help. But he's smarter than all of us, and, believe me, he'll do just fine."

Cornered, she reverted to second grade behavior. "My son may tease, but your son *bites*," Andrea said.

Andrea would have further retaliated, but Leah walked through on her way to the front door, and I got up to intercept her, leaving Andrea alone to be understanding. As Leah put on her backpack, I leaned over and whispered in her ear, "Let's hear it."

A sly smile appeared on her face. "How many letters are there in the alphabet?" she whispered.

I've learned never to guess correctly, even when I'm sure I know the answer. The trick here is to send the child off to school with a victory behind her. Besides, I didn't know what the correct answer was, since "twenty-six" was clearly wrong. "I don't know," I said quietly.

"Eleven," she said. "T-H-E A-L-P-H . . . She counted on her fingers to illustrate.

"Very funny," I said. "Now, go to school." She kissed me and walked out, giggling.

Now, the hard part. I walked back into the kitchen. Dylan had gone upstairs to play video games. Ethan, after all, was no longer around to get in his way. And Howard, face stern and disciplinary, stood from the table when I entered.

“Aaron,” he began to intone.

“I’d love to have this discussion now, Howard,” I told him, “but I have to go see the chief of police, and then follow a rental car mechanic. It’s a full morning.”

That took him by surprise. “A rental car mechanic,” he repeated. “Um, why . . . ?”

“I do that every Thursday,” I said. “Don’t you?”

“Before you leave, perhaps you can help us,” he said. “We’re going into Manhattan today to take Dylan to the Guggenheim,” he said. “But we need to drop off the rental car first.”

“Why? Aren’t you going to be using the car this week?”

He seemed startled. “My sister said we could use your car,” Howard said.

“My car? The Saturn?”

“Abby said it would be all right.”

“Funny, she didn’t mention it to me.” She knew I hated driving the minivan.

“I’m not lying, Aaron.”

“I don’t think you are. So what’s the problem, Howard?”

“Perhaps you’d follow us to the rental office and drive us back to your place. Once we drop off the car, we’ll have no way to get here.”

Much as the idea of them with no way to get back appealed to me, I was confused. “Why doesn’t one of you just drive the Saturn and follow the other to the rental place?”

“Then we wouldn’t be able to ride together,” Andrea said.

“And the problem with that is . . . ?”

Howard looked at me. “This is a family vacation, Aaron. We intend to spend it together as much as possible.”

“Isn’t this taking it to extremes, or do you also follow each other into the bathroom?”

Howard winced. “There’s no need to be disgusting, Aaron. And since you don’t have to be in an *office*. . .

“Let me get my keys,” I snarled.

Chapter Seventeen



“They made you drive them up there so they wouldn’t have to be apart for *ten minutes*?” Barry Dutton, who looks like the box the United Nations building came in, only with arms, shook his head. “Are you sure this guy is related to Abby by blood?”

“If he didn’t look like Abby, I’d wonder if her mom had a thing going with the mailman,” I said. “But they both resemble their father—only Abby pulls it off better.”

“That’s not why you’re here, is it, Aaron?” Being chief of police in Midland Heights meant Barry was overworked and understaffed. He didn’t have time to waste, and besides, he’d already eaten the Dunkin’ Donut I’d brought him.

“No. I wanted to let you know about a threat I think I got last night.”

“More phone calls? Every time you get involved in one of these murder cases, you start getting phone calls. J. Edgar Hoover wouldn’t agree to check your phone records as often as I have.”

“True, but which of you would look better in a pink chiffon dress?”

“You’re right,” Barry said. “I don’t have the legs for it. So who’s calling now?”

“No phone calls,” I told him, and explained about the three men on the sidewalk last night. His eyes widened at the key moment.

“Mr. Shapiro?” he asked. “That’s not good.”

When people hear you’re from New Jersey, they automatically assume you know everyone in Organized Crime. The fact is, I’d never even met anyone who claimed to know anyone in Organized Crime, but I’d heard about Mr. Shapiro.

I looked at Barry. “You mean there really is a Mr. Shapiro? I always assumed he was a myth, like the Jersey Devil and compassionate conservatism.”

He shook his head. "There really is a Mr. Shapiro, all right. And if he's actually the one who sent these guys, you're on to something much larger than you thought, in which case, you want off this one post haste."

Hyman Shapiro was reputed to be the last of the Jewish gangsters operating on the East Coast. He had begun long ago, with Bugsy Siegel and Legs Diamond, and for all I know, Al "The Knish" Rabinowitz. At one time, he supposedly owned the biggest numbers operation in New Jersey, was active in illegal drugs and prostitution, and ran the entire dry cleaning industry in the tri-state area.

They also said he was directly connected to at least 28 murders over the years, but had never been arrested for so much as jaywalking. He was so well insulated that people said his wardrobe came courtesy of Owens-Corning.

"Maybe I do want out," I told Barry. "I didn't sign up to butt heads with Mr. Shapiro. But in the meantime, do I have to worry?"

"They warned you. If you heed the warning, seems to me they'll leave you alone."

"So the chief of police is telling me to give in to the threats of likely felons," I said.

"No, your friend Barry is telling you to give in to the threats of likely felons," he answered. "The chief of police is telling you to be very, very cautious until you're sure they're not after you anymore."

I was about to comment on the comfort level I'd achieved from his advice, but was interrupted by a knock on Barry's office door. Without waiting for Barry to react, Detective Lieutenant Gerald Westbrook opened the door and stuffed himself through.

"A lot of people would expect a 'come in' or something before they barged into their boss' office," Barry told Westbrook.

"I thought it was important, Chief," Westbrook said. He sneered in my general direction. "Tucker."

I barely recognized Westbrook. He had lost at least thirty pounds, which had the same effect on him as skipping dessert on Wednesdays would have on me. But he'd also spruced up his wardrobe. Westbrook's suit jacket and pants actually *matched* now, and his tie, subdued and of normal width, complemented his outfit well.

“Mom picking out your clothes in the morning, Gerry?” I asked. “You look spiffy.”

Westbrook actually blushed while handing a file to Barry. He turned to me and said out of one side of his mouth, “Thank you, Tucker.”

This wasn’t usual at all. Generally, Westbrook only took offense when he understood I was kidding him, which wasn’t often, but he never acted civil. I glanced over at Barry, whose eyes were alive with mischief, and he put a hand up next to his face and mouthed to me, “girlfriend,” and pointed to Westbrook.

“Don’t be silly, Barry,” I told him. “Westbrook isn’t your girlfriend. You’re married . . . to a woman. I’ve met her.”

“I’m saying *he* has a girlfriend, you plague upon the land.” Barry could get all biblical with the best of them.

“No kidding! Who’s the poor afflicted lady, Westbrook?”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” said Westbrook, already wilting under the hot lamps. “She’s just a friend who’s a girl.”

“That’s not what Reggie told Veronica. And she told Jughead that Betty said Archie told her it wasn’t true,” I said.

“What?”

“So, who is it, Gerry? Who’s sweeping you off your feet with an extra large broom?”

“You don’t know her.” Westbrook was truly embarrassed. I almost felt bad, but then I remembered it was Westbrook.

I looked at Barry, who closed the file and smiled. “She works at the All-You-Can-Eat Buffet,” he said. “Her name’s Cyndi.”

“You’re just in it for the free food, aren’t you, Westbrook?” But Gerry wasn’t biting, as it were—he took the file from Barry, nodded in my direction, and walked out.

Barry and I stared at each other for a moment.

“Westbrook’s no fun when he’s gettin’ some regular,” I said. And Barry started to laugh.

After a few more warnings to watch my back (something that is as anatomically impossible as watching your head), Barry cut me loose to pursue my other investigation, the one involving the Mysterious Rental Car Saboteur. Mahoney had already alerted me to his position, which was in Union, near Galloping Hill Road.

The car, a late-model Honda, had broken down in the center of an intersection called Five Points, where (strikingly enough), five relatively major roads come together. So there was a certain amount of time pressure until Mahoney got the car pushed to one side and the traffic began to flow again.

I parked in the lot of the Galloping Hill hot dog stand, showing off my knowledge of the area's fine cuisine and my natural ability to gravitate toward what's bad for me. Mahoney saw me pull in, and called me on the cell phone.

"Nice of you to help me push."

"I didn't want to blow my cover in case The Mole was nearby," I told him.

"The Mole?"

"What do you like better, The Chipmunk? Anyway, what's wrong with this fine automobile? Cigarette lighter on the fritz?"

He had the hood open and was peering inside, out of my sight. "Electrical problem. Loose wire. It's tricky figuring out which one is the culprit because they're all bundled together."

I sat back in the seat and kept the motor running. The temperature had gone all the way up to thirty today, but that's not enough for me to do without a heater. "We have confidence in our man, though," I told him.

"I can't tell you how much that means to me," Mahoney said.

"Why not?"

"There isn't a word to describe something that small."

He found the problem pretty quickly. I thought his speed had something to do with wanting to get his hands back in the warm van before they froze and broke off, but Mahoney claimed he was just good at what he did. Since I can't actually change the oil on a car all by myself, I felt unqualified to argue the point.

As he was driving away, with a promise of more to come in Eatontown, Mahoney said, "Keep your eyes open for The Mole. You never know where these pesky critters will appear."

Since I had managed to situate myself in a prime viewing area, and had equipped myself with a hot dog and Diet Coke from the fine people at the Galloping Hill stand (open year round), I was not at all concerned about the time I'd spend in the van by myself. I had Liz Phair, Fountains of Wayne,

and Jonathan Edwards playing on the cassette deck, and settled back for a nice long stakeout.

It was, however, not meant to be. Within five minutes of Mahoney's departure, a light blue Plymouth Neon appeared on the side of the road. Normally, I'd have assumed the closest rental agency had sent its team out to retrieve the car, but there was something wrong with that theory.

There was only one man in the car.

A nondescript guy in jeans and a non-descript hooded blue parka got out of the Neon, didn't even bother to look around to see if he was being watched, and walked directly to the Honda. He pulled from his pants pocket something small I couldn't see, and proceeded to pick the door lock in about three seconds. But he didn't get into the car—he just released the hood lock.

The guy then walked casually to the front of the car. I couldn't see into the engine, but it wasn't more than ten seconds before he stood up again, closed the hood with gloved hands (that now appeared to have a tiny bit of grease on them, so he made sure to close the hood with his elbow), got back into the Neon, and drove away, all without missing a beat.

I knew better than to go to the Honda. For one thing, I don't know how to pick a lock, and besides, even if I could open the hood, I wouldn't know where to look, and it didn't matter. I could guess what he'd done. He'd pulled the ignition wire and made it impossible to start the car.

I put my car into drive and followed the light blue Neon up Chestnut Street toward the Garden State Parkway. Luckily, I had Mahoney on speed dial on the cell phone.

"Hello?"

"I've got him," I said.

The excitement in his voice was palpable. "Don't lose him. Make sure you find out where he goes. I'll go back to undo his undo."

"Don't worry, Chief," I said. "Agent 86 is on the case." Some people don't remember *Get Smart*, which is why TV Land was born.

I thought The Mole was going to get on the Garden State Parkway, which would make it that much more difficult to follow him, since it's easy to get lost among all the cars. But he didn't. He drove past the GSP entrance and onto the Boulevard in Kenilworth, lined with businesses on either side. Therein lay the problem: it was only a two-lane road, and easier to be

spotted. I was not an experienced follower, and I knew it. But so far, he hadn't seemed to notice me, or he was so nonchalant I wasn't picking up any signals.

I wasn't any more chalang, and did my best to make no sudden lane changes, to speed up, or to slam on the brakes. But at one intersection, with the Neon three cars ahead of me, he decided to gun it through a yellow light, and I couldn't get across in time. I sat at the red, cursing myself silently (since I was still on the cell with Mahoney).

"What's going on? You're quiet. You're never quiet."

"Just give me a minute, okay?" The last thing I needed was to screw this up for Mahoney. First, I'd be letting down my closest friend, a man to whom I literally owed my life. Second, he'd never let me hear the end of it, and for the rest of the life would probably enjoy telling me how badly I'd screwed up.

The light finally changed, and I cruised farther into Kenilworth, with the Neon out of direct sight. I scanned the parking lots on both sides of the Boulevard, and after about half a minute, Mahoney heard what he must have taken to be a combination sigh of relief and groan of confusion. Because that's what it was.

The Neon was parked on one side of the Boulevard, a sharp left from where I was driving. The guy in the jeans and parka was not sitting in the driver's seat, but I had memorized the first few letters in the license plate, and could confirm it was the same car.

"What is it?" Mahoney sounded worried. "Tell me what you see."

"I found the car again."

"You lost it?"

"Just for a second. I couldn't run a red light to keep up."

"So keep following," Mahoney said.

"I don't have to," I told him. "It's parked."

"Yeah? Where?"

"In front of the local office of your rental company. I'm guessing, you understand, but I think the guy who's been screwing up your work is a fellow employee."

Chapter Eighteen



Mahoney and I agreed I should not confront The Mole in his office, since I really didn't know what the man looked like, and would be hard pressed to identify him. Mahoney said he'd be over later to strategize, and I told him to bring our thinking softball. He said he would.

So much was going on in my head that I felt overwhelmed. As I drove home, I tried to sort it out. Michael Huston was shot with an antique handgun by someone who knew about antique handguns. Justin Fowler had been arrested and charged with the crime, based on his possession of the murder weapon, knowledge of such weapons, and last but not least, his own confession.

Then, out of nowhere, I'm beset by three large men who claim that a noted local gangster (reputed, of course) wants me to stop asking questions about Michael Huston's murder. Why? Even if Justin *didn't* shoot Huston, I hadn't found anything out that would implicate Mr. Shapiro. If he hadn't sent the three not-so-wise men, I'd never have even dreamed he was involved.

But suppose he *hadn't* sent the stooges. Suppose they were merely invoking the name of a feared figure in these parts just because they knew it would throw me off the scent. *What* scent? I had a good deal of nothing, and nobody could possibly have been worried that I'd turn something up.

In fact, the only one acting strange in this affair (besides Justin himself, and he had any number of excuses) was . . . Karen Huston. It was clear from the beginning that Karen had some kind of strange bond with her lawyer, who didn't want her to talk but let her talk briefly to me. Then, she lured him out of the room to tell me confidentially that she thinks Justin didn't kill her husband. And when the lawyer came back in, she insisted Justin *did* kill her husband, and broke down enough to send me back out into the cold with absolutely no information whatsoever.

All this, and I couldn't figure out why someone from Mahoney's company would be screwing up his repairs. Who gains when the company does badly?

While I drove home, the thoughts bouncing around between my ears didn't help. But I knew that once I got home, I'd have Howard and the Banshees to deal with, along with the kids, home at three with just another half-day of school before that dreaded time of the year, Winter Break.

Teachers, administrators, and students, I'm sure, look forward to the time leading up to Christmas and through New Year's Day as a welcome holiday, when batteries can be recharged and minds cleared, when pure recreation is the key and the spirit of goodwill to all men (women can clean up the gift-wrapping) is the focus of the season.

Parents, however, particularly those who both work, look upon Winter Break as the Season of Inconvenience, when children must be accounted for during eight extra hours a day. We parents are used to sending the kids off and letting someone else worry about them for awhile. It is twelve long days of ennui for the children, unless the parents—who are used to tap dancing 24/7 anyway—have to work overtime to avoid that scourge of childhood: boredom. God forbid kids should ever have to fend for themselves and come up with their own entertainment. In the 21st century, parents are expected to keep the plates spinning on those poles for twelve long days, and heaven help us if one hits the floor.

For Jewish parents, of course, winter break is also that magical time of year when we are barraged with reminders that we are *different*, that once again the world's greatest party has omitted us from the invite list, and that images of jolly fat men in red suits will serve only to let our children know there's something out there *way* better than what they get, and there's no chance they'll ever have it.

Some compensate by buying a Christmas tree and calling it a "Chanukah bush," which is roughly the equivalent of buying a Yugo, and by dint of calling it a Lexus, expecting it to grow an eight-cylinder engine and room for three more adults.

Meanwhile, the ever-selfless TV networks help us out by making sure that not one minute of original programming airs in December (it's not a sweeps month), filling every available minute with an incredibly lame Christmas special or any movie in which an oncoming snowstorm at the

end is a *good* thing, so as to remind my children of what they're missing. Television networks are licensed by the government as a "public service," which is laughable.

By the time I got home, I had convinced myself to back out of the Justin Fowler story. While \$1,000 was not to be sneezed at, it wasn't enough to risk my life over. Justin, one hoped, would be examined by any number of doctors, represented by a competent lawyer, and not railroaded by the criminal justice system.

I was sure Lori Shery would understand—the minute I worked up the courage to tell her of my decision.

Meanwhile, I checked the house to make sure the Stein family (minus my lovely wife) was absent, which it was. No doubt after the visit to the Guggenheim, Howard and Andrea would be treating their 15-year-old to lunch at a restaurant where Rudolph Giuliani and other prominent Republicans could be seen delicately masticating their salmon. If it were me, I'd have taken the kid to the Automat for a *real* New York dining experience, but it's closed now. A shame.

Warren and I luxuriated in the quiet house, knowing it wouldn't stay that way much longer, nor be that way again for quite some time. I tried to explain Winter Break to Warren, but he got confused over the whole "no Jews at Christmas" thing, and I decided to wait until he grew up a little. Three-year-olds.

Just when I was trying to work up the courage to call Lori, the phone rang. And the caller ID showed Lori's number. The woman has about eight senses.

"Aaron, guess what? I talked to Dr. Winokur, and he says there is some medical basis—"

"Lori, hang on. Hear me out for a second. I may have to stop working on Justin's story."

There was a long silence. "Do you have too much other work?" Lori thinks I'm in demand as much as Dominick Dunne. I said no, and told her about the scene on the street the night before.

"There really *is* a Mr. Shapiro?" She sounded as shocked as I'd been.

"So the police chief says. And I promised Abby I wouldn't put myself in danger of getting killed again until at least New Year's."

“Oh, of course, Aaron,” Lori said. “You can’t put yourself in that kind of danger. You have to stop investigating.”

Well, that was a relief! “I was afraid you’d be mad at me,” I told her.

“Mad at *you*? Like I could ever be mad at you. Really, Aaron!”

I felt like a 20-ton anvil had been lifted from my shoulders. “I’m so glad you understand,” I said. “So we’ll have to let Mary know that I can’t help any more.”

Silence.

“Lori?”

“Yeah. You’ll have to tell Mary you’re no longer investigating.”

“That sounded an awful lot like, ‘What’s this we stuff, Kimosabe? ‘You can’t continue, either, Lori. If Mr. Shapiro can find me, he can find you, too.’”

More silence.

“Lori . . .

“Aaron, I can’t leave Mary and Justin alone in this. You know that. If this boy is going to be convicted because he has Asperger’s, how can I stand by and let that happen?”

I stood up and started pacing. “You know perfectly well that I’m not going to leave you out in the cold to do this yourself, Lori. If you’re still in, I have to be, too.”

“No, you don’t. I’m not trying to pressure you. You’re not the official Asperger’s Syndrome freelance writer, but I’m the co-founder of an Asperger’s group. I’ll destroy all my credibility if I don’t continue. People won’t ever be able to trust me.”

I can’t describe the sound I made as a “sigh.” It was more in the area of “death moan.” “I’m not going to let you get killed so people will trust you more, Lori.”

“And I’m not going to let you get killed to protect me. That would be stupid.” Lori has a talent for digging in her heels. She’s not big or heavy, but she can’t be moved when she doesn’t want to be moved—just like my children.

“Okay,” I said, pacing. “Let’s agree on this. We won’t do anything obvious. We won’t attract attention. If something comes to us, fine, but otherwise, we won’t go out looking for trouble. How does that sound?”

Lori took a long time to think about that. “Okay,” she said. “But if I can help, I’m going to help.”

“Agreed. It’s just—” The call waiting beep, one of the more annoying sounds in modern life, went off in my ear. “Lori, I’ve got someone else calling. Hang on.”

I pushed the “flash” button, which is so ineptly named I can’t begin to consider it (does the phone flash when you push the button? Case closed), and waited a moment. “Hello?”

“Mr. Tucker? This is Karen Huston.”

“Hang on, just for a second, Karen. Okay?” I pushed the “flash” button again, and got Lori.

“Some times,” I told her, “it’s harder than others to be an agnostic.”

Chapter Nineteen



As a reporter, you want people to contact you. So, you give out a lot of business cards. As a freelancer, your business cards often (if not always) include your home phone number. This raises something of a privacy issue, but the pluses outweigh the minuses, and I continue to give out my home number in the hopes some misguided soul will call me with news or a paying assignment.

When I left a business card on Karen Huston's end table, as part of my marathon effort to get out the door without being eaten by a Dalmatian, I hadn't expected it to ever be used, but I took a shot. I did it because I wanted Karen to have the ability to call me without having her lawyer present. It is a Murphy's Law of Freelancing that no great source ever calls you except after you've decided to forego the story.

"How you doing, Karen?" Maybe she was just calling to be social. After all, she'd just buried her husband. Maybe she was looking to start new friendships.

"Not well," she said. "I'm still adjusting." That was it. She wanted a friendly voice, a shoulder to cry on with no history. I could understand that.

"Well, that's certainly understandable," I said. "I can't imagine how hard it must be for you."

"That's not why I'm calling," she said in a flat tone. "Now that my attorney isn't here, I want to discuss this with you in detail." In one's journalism career, there are maybe four occasions when someone who's not actually crazy insists on giving you highly confidential information, and those are times when you absolutely don't want it.

I did my best to hide my lack of enthusiasm, but I had to protect myself. Suppose Mr. Shapiro had my phone tapped? Suppose he had my house under surveillance?

“You’re voluntarily calling me,” I said to whoever else was listening. “I didn’t ask you to call.”

“Well, I did find your business card on my end table,” she said helpfully, “but no, you didn’t ask me to call. I thought you wanted to hear about Michael.”

If it’s possible to sigh internally, I did. “Yes, I do,” I said, resisting the impulse to bite my tongue. “But I’m guessing there’s something specific you want me to know, or you wouldn’t have called.”

There was silence for a few seconds, and Karen said, “Yes, there is something.”

“Is it linked to what you told me before—that you don’t think Justin Fowler shot your husband?”

“Yes,” she almost whispered. “I just keep thinking about that poor young man, and I can’t let him be put him in jail. You know, he’s got some condition . . .

“I know,” I said. I wasn’t interested in giving her any autobiographical details.

“Well,” and I heard a major snuffle in her voice, “I can’t let him suffer for something he didn’t do. I think it was much more complicated than that. I think I know who . . . who shot Michael.”

Never let it be said I didn’t deliver the straight line when necessary. “Who?” I asked.

“I can’t be sure,” she said, “but I think Michael was involved with the Mob.”

You hear *that*, Mr. Shapiro?

Chapter Twenty



After I caught my breath, I managed, “What makes you think *that*, Karen?”

Her voice took on an eerie quality, as if it weren’t emanating from a human being, but coming from somewhere other than her body. It sounded far away and slightly pained. I’m not sure Karen was thinking about what she was saying. Might she be on tranquilizers to deal with Michael’s death? Was her judgment impaired?

“He was never secretive about his work. He had always told me everything, even when it was clear I wasn’t interested. Michael was a financial planner and a good one, but I never really understood what he was talking about when he told me about his day. I have more of an artistic mindset. But Michael was thrilled with the numbers game, and he played it very well. I’m sure that if he’d . . . lived, we’d have moved into a much bigger, more expensive house within a year or two.

“But lately,” Karen continued, “he was coming home and not telling me about his day. At first, I’m ashamed to say it, I didn’t mind very much, because I didn’t have to pretend to be fascinated by interest rates and brilliant financial strategies. But after a while, I became concerned. It wasn’t like Michael to shut me out from such an important area of his life, and he was truly proud of the work he did. He wouldn’t keep it from me unless there was something wrong.”

“*Was* there something wrong?” Okay, so it’s not a brilliant question, but it gave me something to say. How does a guy not telling his wife about a day at the office lead to involvement with the Kosher Consigliore?

“He never said anything, but he started getting phone calls. At home. Calls that made him nervous. Calls he wouldn’t tell me about. And Michael said he thought someone followed him when he walked Dalma at night.” Karen Huston’s voice had almost no affect at all—it was like the tone you

hear when you talk to someone more severely autistic than Ethan or the other Asperger kids.

I thought, naturally, of Big, Bigger, and Biggest, otherwise known as the Hyman Shapiro Trio.

“There was something else,” Karen added suddenly. “Michael didn’t leave a will.”

“Well,” I said, thinking I really ought to get around to writing one myself one of these days, “he was such a young man.”

“Aaron,” she interrupted with an urgent tone, “you’re not listening. Michael was a brilliant financial planner. He spent his days consumed with the idea of being ready for contingencies and emergencies, and he helped his clients consider every possibility in their financial lives. He is . . . was . . . the last man on earth who wouldn’t have been prepared.”

“So you think . . . what?” Respect, *reschmect*. I wasn’t following.

“I think someone stole the will because of what he might have included in it,” Karen said. “I mean, I don’t think Michael left a fortune to gangsters, but it’s possible he fell into debt with them by gambling, or . . . something, and couldn’t pay it off. And maybe no one wants me to know how little is left.”

“Has your lawyer looked into this?” I asked.

“Yes, but he hasn’t found anything yet. Michael didn’t use the same lawyer as I did. I know it sounds odd, but we both had reasons to be loyal to the attorneys we each had before we met, and we just never thought it would be an issue. Michael used to joke that we were all set for the divorce.” She put a laugh on the end of the sentence for me, but it wasn’t real.

“Who was his lawyer?”

“John Markowitz,” she said without hesitation. “He’s in Metuchen.” She gave me the phone number, and I promised to give him a call.

It wasn’t the most convincing argument I’d ever heard: a man doesn’t leave a will and clams up about his job, and thus is involved with organized crime. If I hadn’t had the visit from the Three Tenors, I’d have dismissed the whole notion as the thoughts of a recent widow obviously still in mourning and not necessarily thinking as clearly as she normally would.

But I had been visited by Shapiro’s men, and that, added to Karen’s suspicions, had to mean *something*.

I put in a call to Abby, to see if she knew anything about either Rezenbach or Markowitz. Sleeping with a lawyer is a great way to find out about other lawyers. But she was in a client meeting. So I weighed my options. They weighed 156 pounds, and thanks for asking.

My intention this afternoon was to completely distance myself from the Michael Huston story—an effort that had been, let's say, less than one hundred percent successful thus far, inasmuch as I was now more involved than I had been, with sources actually calling me on the phone to offer their somewhat bizarre theories on the subject. But the strong possibility existed that people with guns that shot more than one bullet before reloading were interested in my not asking any more questions, and since my first responsibility is to my family, I felt I had an obligation not to be dead.

On the other hand, there was Lori Shery, who was threatening to let *herself* become dead if I quit the investigation. It wasn't Lori's intention to keep me involved, but I couldn't let her be the most visible target. And then there was the *Snapdragon* assignment, which was only my second from the magazine. It's bad for business to back out of a commissioned story.

Clearly, this was a conundrum. If I were sports agent Myron Bolitar, no doubt somebody would drop dead right in front of my eyes and I'd be implicated, thus necessitating my seeing the investigation to its conclusion while pining away for one of the many former loves of my life. This is what I got for not being Myron Bolitar.

Ethan and Leah would be home within an hour, and only the deity that governs the severely Yuppified would know when Howard and his Band of Renown would be back. I had an hour, and what I clearly should be doing with it was making the changes Glenn Waterman wanted in my screenplay.

So, naturally, I called Mary Fowler.

"Mary, is Justin at home right now?"

"Yes, but I'm not sure this is a good time to come see him, Aaron."

"I don't want to see him. Put him on the phone, okay?"

She hesitated, but put down the phone, and I heard her ask Justin to pick up. Mary told her son who was calling, but he took the phone anyway.

"Hello, Mr. Tucker. My mom said to pick up."

"Yes, Justin, I have a question . . ."

"No, no, no! I'm not saying anything about that."

I knew that was coming, so I waited for a pause and jumped in. “Justin, where would someone find ammunition for a vintage gun like the Booth deringer?”

He showed no sign of surprise at the conversation’s direction. “The .44 Deringer was a percussion cap and ball type,” Justin immediately began lecturing. “Several companies still produce the lead ball type ammunition, as well as the black gunpowder and percussion caps needed to fire the weapon.”

“But the gun that shot Michael Huston”—and I felt this was a less threatening way to bring the murder into the conversation—“wasn’t a vintage gun, was it? It was a replica, right?”

You could pretty much hear him nod through the phone. “Yes,” Justin said. “But such replicas are not at all uncommon, and are actually available through several sources. In fact, many states do not require a replica weapon like this to be registered, or for the owner to fill out a permit request, as they would with modern weapons.”

That made sense. The killer didn’t want the gun to be traced to its owner, so buying a gun that didn’t need to be registered, even if it were purchased in another state, would be a simple way to remain anonymous.

I had read a little about the Lincoln assassination (in fact, I’d written a screenplay about it, and am more than willing to discuss the rights, but that’s another story), and knew something about Booth’s gun. “It wasn’t like a gun today, was it, Justin?” I asked. “I mean, to fire it.”

“No,” he agreed. “It predated the kind of ammunition we would use today. There was no cartridge. The shooter would have to load the weapon separately for each shot fired.”

“And that was a complex process, wasn’t it? I mean, you practically had to load it up like a musket, didn’t you?” Keep him talking, and ease into the questions you *really* want to ask.

“In a way, yes,” Justin said. “The shooter would pour a measured amount of black powder down the muzzle, and then center a fabric patch on the muzzle. A lead ball, or the bullet, would be placed on top of the patch, and then rammed together with the fabric patch, in a move similar to that of tamping down a musket shot. Once the ball was tight against the fabric patch, and they sat next to the powder charge, the friction-fit was tight enough to prevent it from rolling out of the barrel. The final preparation

would be to press a percussion cap, filled with mercury fulminate, onto the nipple the hammer rests against.”

“Mel Gibson would have a rough time loading that and jumping out a window at the same time, huh?”

“Yes,” Justin said without a chuckle, “he would.”

I decided to push just a little bit harder.

“So if someone wanted to shoot a man out in the street, he’d really have to plan ahead, wouldn’t he?” Just start moving in the direction you want to go, and see if the subject follows you.

But there was a tense flavor to Justin’s voice now. “Yes,” was all he said.

If Mr. Shapiro was on my trail, there wasn’t much time. I had to get to the real questions. This is a careful process, one that is less knowledge than a combination of instinct and practice. I’ve had a lot of practice. “Justin,” I started slowly, “why did you confess?”

“Goodbye,” he said, and hung up.

Chapter Twenty-One



Dinner that night was a relatively calm affair, since Howard thought so much of his sister that he decided to stay in New York for the evening repast rather than spend an evening with her and her family. Some people travel 2,000 miles to see family members, and others come to check out works of modern art and use family members' homes as hotels. Not that I minded being without the three non-Abigail Steins for the night, but I could tell Abby was a little hurt, and that doesn't sit well with me.

They walked in, of course, while I was throwing the softball around with Mahoney. Jeff and I have this routine, which we started during the purgatory years known as "high school." When a problem perplexed us enough, which at the time involved virtually every female we knew, we hashed it out while throwing a softball back and forth. More than twenty-five years out of high school now, our arms are not as accurate as they once were, our breakable possessions somewhat more expensive—and we're now the ones paying for them—and our problems no longer involve getting to a particular base with a particular girl. We're both married, and believe we've already reached most of the important bases.

"What I don't get is why someone from my own company would be blowing up my work on purpose," Mahoney said as he whizzed a throw directly into my hands, necessitating no movement at all on my part, "What's the motivation?"

"There are two possibilities," I answered, having actually given this topic some thought while I was supposed to be writing an article on lap-top computers. "Either someone thinks they can advance in the company by making it look like you're slipping . . .

"Or?" Mahoney was concentrating so hard he almost missed my throw, which was admittedly errant, and came close to dropping it on Warren, who as usual had abandoned the entire family he lived with and glued himself to

Mahoney's left calf the minute my best friend walked in the door. Yes, man's best friend, but they don't specify which man.

"Or, someone just hates your guts."

"Well, that doesn't seem likely. It must be the first one," Mahoney said, tossing the ball casually at me and dropping it into my hands so effortlessly it was embarrassing when I couldn't hold on.

"Clearly, no one could ever be annoyed with *you*." The ball rolled a few feet, and I had to get up to retrieve it. For those of you keeping track at home, that last remark was sarcastic.

Mahoney, of course, took it seriously. "Obviously. So . . . we have to determine who would benefit from my apparent slippage."

"That, and I have to figure out why Michael Huston's wife thinks he was mixed up with Tony Soprano's rabbi." I tried my curveball on Mahoney, who managed to snare it just before it hit Warren in a most unfortunate part of his anatomy. Luckily, Warren had already been taken in for the customary surgery.

"We're back to that? I thought you were going to turn this one over to the cops and lawyers, and protect that low-to-the-ground ass of yours." Mahoney didn't like shifting the discussion away from his problem, so he emphasized the difference in our height.

"Lori wanted me to," I told him. "But she wasn't going to give up herself." He nodded.

"Can't let her be the primary target," he agreed. His throw was a little softer this time, protecting my hands.

"Besides," I continued, "the victim's wife called me herself and said she thinks he was involved with the Mob." I decided on a one-hopper to Mahoney, and Warren practically had a heart attack when it bounced over his head into Mahoney's hands.

"Why did she do that?"

"Only one in a series of interesting questions. But it seems to answer why Mr. Shapiro and his minions are concerned about my general nosiness."

Mahoney smiled. "Minions?"

I was sitting too close to the door, so when it flew open, letting in the coldest air in the universe and, appropriately enough, Howard, the softball

almost hit my brother-in-law in the face. The fact that I managed to snag the ball and save him any serious injury seemed not to impress Abby's brother.

"Whoa!" he recoiled, the ball floating harmlessly into my hands. "What is going on?"

Andrea rushed in after him, not understanding why her husband was leaning backward. Dylan squeezed in behind them, sauntered past, and headed upstairs, where he would no doubt try to shame Ethan into letting the guest play on the PlayStation. He had no idea the force of nature he was up against.

(Yes, I know I had mentioned that Ethan was supposed to be banned from PlayStation for biting his cousin. But I figured that was Abby's rule to enforce, and so far, she hadn't done so.)

"Close the door!" I shouted. "We're thinking!"

Andrea closed the door while Howard stood in her way, looking like he was going to ground us for a week before he realized it wasn't his house (and he probably thanked whatever deity he worships for that). I threw the ball back to Mahoney, and Andrea, lacking any conditioned response for the situation, ran into the kitchen—and I mean *ran* —to see if Abby needed help making coffee, or something. It's my belief that coffee-making is a one-person task, but it seemed like Millie Helper was always aiding Laura Petrie in that very endeavor, so what do I know?

Howard stood there and watched incredulously as we tossed the ball back and forth a couple more times. Neither Mahoney nor I advanced any theories about either of our dilemmas while Howard watched. It was intimidating.

"Hi, Howard," Mahoney said.

"Hello," the Imperious One answered, clearly having forgotten either Mahoney's name or his entire existence since they'd last seen each other.

The ball went back and forth. Warren was falling asleep from the sheer thrill of it all. A game of catch, and he didn't have to do anything! All dogs do indeed go to heaven.

Finally, I could stand the tension no more. "Do you mind, Howard?" I said. "We're trying to work out our problems here."

Howard, sharp as a tack, took this as an invitation to join the conversation, which was at that moment not so much a conversation as a prolonged silence due to his presence. You just can't be blunt with some

people. He waited until the ball was not actually in the air, and sat down to my left, on the sofa. If he thought we were going to throw him the ball, he was crazy.

“What kind of problems?” he asked with a great degree of eagerness. Obviously, he was hoping it would be some kind of financial problem, so he could show off his slick expertise. I was going to cut him down with a snide remark when I heard Abby’s voice in my mind’s ear: “He’s trying to help—he’s reaching out. Be nice.”

Sometimes, it’s annoying having a wife who doubles as Jiminy Cricket.

Cursing my Inner Abby, I sighed. She was right. “Well, I’m trying to figure out who killed this guy walking his dog. The cops think it was a kid with AS, but I’m starting to see some involvement by a reputed mob figure, and I’d appreciate your not mentioning that part to your sister. And so far, there’s no evidence except a replica of the gun that shot Abraham Lincoln.”

“And I’m trying to determine who could possibly be sabotaging my repairs,” Mahoney added, clearly reading my tone and trying to help. “The only possibilities are that someone wants to advance in my company or that they don’t like me, so I’m assuming they want to advance in the company. And once I find them, I figure I’ll beat ’em to a bloody pulp.”

I looked at Howard. “What do you think?” I asked.

He never said anything. He just stood up and walked past us into the kitchen.

Mahoney and I raised an eyebrow at each other, shrugged, and went back to throwing the ball around.

“Pity,” I said. “I thought he was going to solve it for us.”

“Yeah,” Mahoney nodded. “Me, too.”

Chapter Twenty-Two



There was no point in following Mahoney's gremlin again until we had a plan, so the next morning, I was back at Karen Huston's house, without invitation.

She let me in, but seemed wary. She needn't have been. Dalma was in the room, and she quite obviously wasn't happy she had to share it with me. The dog was growling low in her throat and watching me carefully as Karen ushered me in. I took the same seat as before.

"Karen, I'm sorry to burst in on you like this, but I didn't understand your phone call yesterday. I don't see how you make the leap from your husband being moody to his involvement with organized criminals."

Karen sat down. She hadn't been expecting anyone, and was in jeans and a sweatshirt that read "Emerson College." She looked into my eyes and shook her head slowly.

"You can't understand," she said, "because you're basing your assumptions on the average marriage. Michael and I did not have an average marriage."

"Nobody has an average marriage," I said.

"That's true, but I think you know what I mean. We were much more . . . intense, I guess, than most married people. We really were soul mates, and I can't explain why I usually knew what he was thinking, and how he usually knew how I felt. But we did. We had the most symbiotic relationship I've ever seen or experienced. Nobody was as married as Michael and I were."

I didn't bother to contradict her, since the last thing I needed at this point was a "my-marriage-is-just-as-good-as-your-marriage" argument. Seeing as how her husband was dead, it seemed a little unfair to try for the upper hand.

“So what you’re saying is that some intuitive feeling told you your husband was involved with gangsters. Is that what you’re saying?” That didn’t come out right, either. I sounded less like a friendly reporter trying to understand and more like Perry Mason trying to pin the crime on her.

“There were also the phone calls, and Michael . . . well, Michael was nervous for a couple of weeks before it happened. He wasn’t as attentive to me as he usually was, and believe me, that was a major sea change. I was the center of Michael’s universe, and he wasn’t even noticing when I was in the room. That was *not* usual, believe me.”

I didn’t know how to say it nicely, so I just said it. “Isn’t it possible that he wasn’t as . . . attentive because his mind might have been occupied, um, elsewhere?”

Karen started as if slapped, and the dog stood. Her tail was straight out and stiff, and she growled louder. “Dalma, *no*,” Karen said, and the dog sat down but continued to stare at me. Karen turned her attention back to me. “If you’re asking whether I think Michael was cheating on me, Mr. Tucker, I’m sorry, but I just don’t consider that to be a possibility. You really can’t understand the kind of marriage we had.”

Or, maybe *she* couldn’t understand the kind of marriage they had.

Karen made sure Dalma stayed in her dog bed while I left, apologizing for anything I said that might have been disturbing. She apologized for her dog, who was staring intently at me and grumbling as I walked to the door. Karen assured me it was all right—I was just doing my job thoroughly—and led me back out into the sub-zero freezer New Jersey had become lately. It was a miracle we didn’t have snow, but it actually might have been too cold for it.

With a little time left before the kids got home from their half day—and stayed until the following year—I decided to pay a visit on the North Brunswick detective handling the Huston case. Justin’s sudden arrest, with so little physical evidence, still didn’t sit right with me.

Since this time I actually knew where I was going, it took only ten minutes longer than it should have to find Detective Lieutenant Ronald T. Rodriguez, a man whose clothing and demeanor made him seem like a tenth grade science teacher disguised as a cop. Rodriguez, having been told by his chief that a reporter for *Snapdragon* was interested in the case, wasn’t surprised to see me, but then, he probably hadn’t registered surprise since

1996, when the Yankees came back in Game Four of the World Series on a three-run home run by Jim Leyritz.

“We didn’t go to Fowler’s house expecting to find a suspect,” Rodriguez said. “We went looking for expert information on the gun once the M.E. removed that weird excuse for a bullet from the vic.”

“Wow. The *vic*? You guys really talk like that?” I thought only Dennis Farina said “the vic.” Of course, if I were Miss Marple and someone said “the vic,” they’d probably mean “the vicar,” and then I’d have to find out what a vicar is, because before I became an agnostic, I was Jewish, and we don’t have vicars. But this might be just a hair off-topic.

“We really do,” Rodriguez said without so much as a tiny grin. He was playing me, and having a great time doing it, so he couldn’t smile. Probably in his attic at home, a portrait showed him grinning from ear to ear. “But once we got to the house, and were allowed in by Fowler’s mother”—he wanted me to know they hadn’t entered without permission, so the confession couldn’t be thrown out of court—“we found the gun, and he broke the land speed record for confessing.”

“No good cop-bad cop?” I asked.

“Nope. Didn’t need it. He owned up within seconds.” Damn. If the case ever went to trial, and Justin’s Asperger’s didn’t account for his confession, it would be much more difficult to discount its importance or validity. Every step I took in this story seemed to make it worse.

“Who bailed Justin out?” I asked. “Was it his brother?” Since Kevin had left the house less than an hour before Justin was released, vowing to get him out immediately, he seemed the most likely suspect in every way but financially.

“He was bailed out by a bondsman, Terrance McShea of Carteret, and Mr. McShea’s not saying who put up the money.”

“Is that unusual?”

Rodriguez cast a sideways glance in my direction. “It’s not unheard of, but it isn’t standard, either. Usually, there’s no reason to keep the bondholder’s name secret. I’ve only seen it happen in a couple of cases.” His voice betrayed something he wanted to say, but he stopped himself.

“What kind of cases?” I asked.

“Mob cases,” he answered.

Driving home, I had to admit there was something awfully strange about this story. If Justin Fowler *hadn't* shot Michael Huston, he'd done a remarkably good job of framing himself.

Nothing was adding up, and I was used to that. This kind of thing didn't happen to Elvis Cole or Spenser—they always knew who the bad guys were, who needed to be protected, and what kind of firearm was best suited to dropping an elephant in its tracks (whenever they're talking about a gun used by a bad guy, it's one that's "best suited to stopping an elephant in its tracks"). I, on the other hand, knew exactly what kind of firearm had been used in this crime, and it was especially well suited to dropping Great Emancipators in their tracks while they were watching light comedies called "Our American Cousin." That wasn't much help, really.

It had been a fast-paced morning, so I figured I'd have some time to do screenplay revision before the kids got home, if I started right in. Normally, I can't write an original word of fiction before three in the afternoon, but rewriting is another story. You've already done the heavy lifting, and don't need to make up as much, so it's actually possible for me to get some work done before the hour my creative muse usually gets up from her traditional eighteen-hour nap.

So naturally, I called Cynthia Opdyke, whom Karen Huston had listed among the best friends she and Michael had in the world, at least since they were married. In previous conversations with their friends (including Pearl, the roommate who had introduced the two), I had been given such glowing reviews of the Huston marriage I was beginning to feel my own was a summer stock production of "Carousel" starring Wink Martindale.

This next interview proved no exception. "They were the perfect couple," Cynthia said after I'd explained my tenuous connection to the matter. "You know, Mr. Tucker, you hear about marriages like theirs, but you never really see one. I saw one."

"So no chance that Michael was seeing someone else?"

By now, having asked this question three or four times, I knew enough to pull the receiver from my ear. The laugh was just as loud as the others had been. "No!" she screamed. "You don't know the level of devotion that man had, Mr. Tucker. He wouldn't have cheated on Karen if J. Lo, Halle Berry, and Britney Spears had offered him a foursome."

"Well, how about Karen?"

“Mr. Tucker,” she said with a patronizing tone, “the man sent her flowers on a Tuesday, *for no reason*. He cooked dinner for her and did the laundry. He took her to Paris for her thirtieth birthday. The man loaded and unloaded the dishwasher *without being asked*. Do you know another husband like that?”

Actually, I knew one other man like that, minus the Paris trip. When Abby turned thirty, I believe I took her out to dinner at a Cajun place we used to frequent, then to a production of Medea at the George Street Playhouse in New Brunswick. She tells me it was a fine production. I remember it only as a refreshing nap.

If Michael wasn’t cheating, I figured, he was probably involved in some kind of financial trouble. So my next call was to his lawyer, who, I expected, would point me in the right direction.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Tucker,” said John Markowitz. “I don’t know what I can tell you. Michael Huston didn’t have a will for a logical reason, although I didn’t agree with it. He knew that by New Jersey law, in the absence of a will, his entire estate would go to his next of kin, Karen. He wanted his wife to have whatever he left behind, and knew it would happen automatically, so he never saw the need for a will.”

“Was there any indication of financial trouble? Gambling? Loans? *Anything?*”

“Nothing,” Markowitz said. “As far as I know, everything was completely normal, and the Hustons were actually doing quite nicely.” *Well*, that wasn’t any help. “But Michael never really trusted me with *all* his records. He always wanted a good deal of his money to be his own, in places he wouldn’t tell me about. I really have no idea how much money he had in total.” And that was even less help.

So far this morning, I was batting zero-for-two, so I figured I couldn’t do worse with the bail bondsman, Terrance McShea of Carteret. He, on the other hand, saw true potential for me to get even less information than I had from the others.

“Look, if the person who puts up the bond wants to be anonymous, I keep them anonymous,” he said once I mentioned the magic name of Justin Fowler. “They don’t want their name mentioned, I don’t mention their name.” He seemed out to prove that redundancy could be, um, redundant.

“Well, without names, can you tell me what collateral was put up for the two hundred grand?” I asked.

“Nothing. The bond was in cash.”

“So someone put up two hundred thousand dollars in cash, then paid you a fee to post bond in court?”

“That’s exactly right,” McShea said. “And you thought you wouldn’t catch on.”

“Why would someone do that?” I asked.

With a tone meant to convey heavy sarcasm, McShea said, “I guess they wanted to be *anonymous*.” Thanks for the help, McShea.

The phone calls hadn’t done me any good, so it was clearly time to attack the screenplay. This project was, I reminded myself, what I’d wanted for years. Time to prove I deserved it.

Unfortunately, I’d barely gotten through the emails that had accumulated since I left, and was just about to open the “Minivan” computer file, when the doorbell rang. I usually get either Jehovah’s Witnesses or the UPS guy at this time of day, so when I rose to answer the door, I was hoping for a brown truck outside the window.

But there was nothing but a big black SUV in the driveway. Maybe Howard and the Steins had let some trendy friends know they were in town, but had neglected to tell them this particular day was being devoted to a visit to the Edison Historical Site in West Orange, which is actually a very cool place. I was willing to bet Dylan would be so bored he’d jump out a second story window. Nonetheless, the company obviously didn’t know their friends weren’t home right now.

I was also very disappointed not to find Jehovah’s Witnesses on the doorstep, because when I opened the door and started to say, “They’re not home,” I was greeted instead by Big, Bigger, and Biggest.

“Mr. Shapiro wants to see you,” Big said, grinning broadly and looking down on me.



Part Two

FAMILY

Chapter One



Big was smiling not because he was so happy to see me, I decided. He was smiling because he enjoyed this part of his job.

“I really can’t leave right now,” I said.

“Yes, you can,” said Bigger. He wasn’t grinning, and that was worse.

“My kids will be home in an hour and a half,” I told Big. “Do you think you can have me back by then?” Okay, so I was essentially begging for a ray of hope.

“Don’t worry,” Big said. Easy for him to say.

As I got my coat, walked out, and locked the door behind me, Warren looked at me sadly, as if he knew we wouldn’t be taking any future walks together. There wasn’t even anywhere to run—I was going without so much as a whimper.

“Get in,” said Bigger, opening the back door of the SUV. I got in. What did you think I was going to do? If I were Jack Reacher, the exmilitary cop/one-man wrecking crew, I probably would have shot each of them twelve or thirteen times, and then had sex with a female police officer. Alas, Jack was elsewhere that day.

Biggest drove. As we were pulling out of the driveway, Howard and company drove up in my Saturn, and waited until we were out to pull into my driveway. Howard even waved as Biggest drove us away. I made a mental note to inform my wife, if I ever saw her again, of what a doofus her brother was.

The drive wasn’t long. Of course, the windows were tinted, which is supposedly illegal in New Jersey, but no one cares. I could still see out, and they were making no effort to keep me from seeing the route. Don’t they usually put blindfolds on you, or something, so you won’t be able to testify? Of course, I’d seen all three of their faces. They weren’t expecting me to testify.

The SUV pulled up to a gate in Millburn, a Union County town for people who think they should be residents of Morris County. Millburn isn't quite as ritzy as its neighbor, Short Hills (which is actually in Essex County, truth be told), but then, it's been said some sections of Heaven aren't quite as ritzy as Short Hills. The gate opened, although no gatetender was visible.

The house was quite impressive—a huge Victorian, tasteful in every way but ostentatious in size. Biggest pulled the car up to the entrance, and Big motioned for me to get out. Much as I didn't want to go inside the house, staying in the car seemed a worse option, so I complied—as if I had a choice.

Bigger opened the front door without knocking and led me into the entrance hall, then through a large living room with a roaring fireplace and toward a very impressive solid wood door. Here, he knocked.

"Come," came a voice. Bigger opened the door and made sure I walked in ahead of him.

The room, of course, was enormous. And though I expected something darker and more Brando-like, this man wasn't even sitting in a swivel chair, behind his desk, so he could spin and suddenly reveal himself to be the double-dealing superior officer I had thought I could trust.

Instead, Hyman Shapiro was standing in the center of the room, walking toward me with a hand extended, and smiling. He was pushing eighty, but his gait was brisk and he was trim and seemingly quite fit. I found myself taking his hand, disarmed by the fact that he didn't -seem to be getting ready to kill me.

"Mr. Tucker," he said with the slightest trace of an accent we second-generation types associate mostly with our grandparents. Yiddish will die out as a living language soon, and it'll be a shame. Shapiro's Eastern European roots were showing in his voice. "I'm Hyman Shapiro. Thank you for coming on such short notice."

I decided to see what the parameters were. "It's not that I mind a slight case of abduction now and then," I said, "but I have tickets to the theatre, to a play I've been looking forward to seeing. And I get, well, kind of unreasonable about things like that."

He chuckled with appreciation. "Cary Grant," he said. "*North by Northwest*. Very good. Come. Sit down."

So I sat down. In front of the desk were several very nice armchairs, which reminded me of the Oval Office set for “West Wing.” There was a table between them with a coffee urn and a tray of baked goods. Shapiro wasn’t only a big-time gangster—he could obviously cater. We sat there so Shapiro could show what a regular guy he was. In the presence of this slim little man, it was difficult to believe he was reputed to cause all sorts of mayhem and bloodshed.

“Bagel?” He gestured to the tray. “We get the best, Sonny Amster’s, from right here in town.” Sonny’s bagels are legendary, but my stomach wasn’t really in the mood for anything except abject terror. I shook my head. “Your loss,” he said, taking a bagel and placing half of one, dry, on a plate.

“Why am I here, Mr. Shapiro?”

“That’s good. To the point. I like that,” Shapiro said. He was doing his very best to be charming. “I suppose you’ve heard of me.”

“To tell you the truth, until the Three Stooges showed up on my doorstep, I thought you were a myth,” I said.

Shapiro took a bite of bagel (salt) and nodded, chewing. “Better that way,” he said when he could. “People don’t come looking for a myth, and my reputation is a lot more intimidating than the real thing.”

“Oh, I dunno,” I said, glancing at Big and Bigger, who were on their feet at opposite sides of his desk, looking on impassively.

“Believe me, I didn’t do half the things they say I did,” Shapiro continued. “I’m a businessman, and businessmen sometimes have to do things they’d prefer not to do in order to get ahead. That’s all.”

“No offense, Mr. Shapiro, but I’m not your rabbi. Why am I here?” If he was going to kill me, it didn’t matter if I was rude, and if he wasn’t going to kill me, being rude didn’t matter, either. Besides, I really wanted one of those Sonny Amster bagels now, but I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction.

“You’re right. I got—what do they call it?—off-topic. You’re here, Mr. Tucker, because you continued with your investigation even after my employees here informed you of my preference that you stop. I’d like to know why. Has my myth deteriorated to the point where I’m not fearsome anymore?” That last question was delivered with just the right eye-twinkle to convince me he was trying to be witty.

“On the contrary, because I thought you *were* a myth, I didn’t think it was necessary to pay attention to you. But even though Groucho, Harpo, and Chico showed up and warned me off, I wasn’t able to stop.”

“Why not?” He seemed genuinely interested.

“Because you *are* fearsome. Because, if I got out of the way, a friend of mine would have been the next most visible target, and this friend wouldn’t be scared off. So I had to stay the most visible target to protect my friend.”

“That’s very noble,” he said. “I admire that kind of loyalty, however misguided.”

“Loyalty, however misguided,” I said. “James Mason, *North by Northwest*. The same scene, even.”

“I like the movies,” he beamed. “But this is real life, Aaron.”

“The question, really, is why you want me to stop looking into the Michael Huston murder,” I said. “Certainly, *I’m* not so fearsome as to warrant this kind of attention.”

Shapiro took a sip of coffee from a cup on the table, and grimaced. “Decaf, can you believe it?” he said. “At my age, the bagel, with no cream cheese, is about all I can enjoy. And they call this living.”

“Why, Mr. Shapiro?”

He stared at me a moment, deciding whether or not to be offended. “Do you think it’s because I’m afraid you’ll find out I was responsible for the shooting?” he said. “Believe me, Aaron, you’re looking in the wrong place for that one. I had nothing to do with Michael Huston being shot. His death produced no benefit to me.”

“I’m told he might have owed serious money to someone in . . . your business,” I said.

“Dry cleaning? He owed a lot of money to his dry cleaner?” Shapiro was obviously having some fun now. “He had a pair of pants altered and didn’t pay up on time? I don’t think so.”

“Perhaps it was one of your other businesses,” I suggested.

Shapiro lost his mischievous grin and shook his head. “No,” he said. “Michael Huston didn’t owe me a dime. I had no reason to want him dead.” He actually looked sad.

“Then, why?”

Shapiro gave me a sharp look. “No,” he said. “You’ll get no more information from me, Aaron. I’m sorry.” He glanced at Big, and said, “It’s

time for Aaron to leave.” Big nodded, and started toward me.

Oh, shit.

I wasn’t above begging, I soon found out. The image of Leah crying for her daddy was very strong. “Mr. Shapiro,” I said, “please. I have a twelve-year-old son and a nine-year-old daughter . . .

He seemed confused. “What do you want, an autograph?” he asked. “I don’t do that. I’m not a good role model for the *kindele*.”

“No, sir. I just mean . . .

A light bulb went on over Shapiro’s head, and he laughed. “Do you think I’m going to have them kill you, Aaron?” he said. “Is *that* what you think?”

It had been. Now I was worried I’d insulted the old gangster. “Well, I mean, with the three guys and the black car, and . . .

“Too many movies, Aaron,” he shook his head. “I told you, this is real life. If I really wanted something to happen to you, it would happen. But I don’t want that, and I can’t do it now, anyway. Everybody from the Attorney General down to the cop on the beat watches this house, and if you went missing all of a sudden, believe me, this would be the first door they’d knock on. Oh, you’re safe enough, Aaron. But I still want you to stop the questions . . . as a favor to me.”

Having embarrassed myself by begging, I could now turn bold. I shook my head. “I’m sorry, Mr. Shapiro,” I said. “I can’t do that.”

He nodded, understanding. “Well, there is one thing you can do for me, Aaron, and I don’t even think you’ll mind.”

“What is that, sir?”

“I got more than a dozen of these bagels, and I don’t want them to go stale. You’ll take some home?”

Sometimes, you have to make a moral stand and not accept anything from people whose actions do not meet with society’s approval.

On the other hand, these were Sonny Amster bagels.

“What the hell,” I said. “Sure.”

Chapter Two



Biggest got me home a scant few minutes before Leah burst through the door, shedding coats, scarves, sweaters, and backpacks like a snake dropping skin. Howard and Andrea were in the kitchen, waiting for me to make them lunch with my fresh bagels, and Dylan had disappeared into Ethan's room and the sanctuary of PlayStation. I was trying to remember how not to shake like a leaf.

"Yay!" screamed my daughter. "No more school this year!" As I bent over to catch her, she flung her arms around my neck and gave me a kiss on the cheek. "I'm free, Daddy!" Leah did the butter-churning dance, the international sign of joy for all people who don't remember music before Justin Timberlake.

"Where's your report card?" It always comes home the day of a vacation, so parents can forget what the grades are before school starts again, and not complain to teachers quite so much.

Her face froze, and she trudged to the backpack, lying on the floor in front of the door, unzipped it, and removed a small manila envelope with "LEAH" written on the front in block letters. Such matters are serious in the fourth grade.

Leah's face lost its usual glow as she handed the envelope over. The kids are instructed in school not to look at the report cards before they get home, but nobody listens. So I knew she'd seen it, and she didn't look happy.

"What's wrong, honey?" She shook her head.

I opened the envelope, and took out the card. There are always statistics aplenty about attendance and tardiness, plus notes from teachers, including those teaching pass/fail courses like music and health, and other important information. The heck with all that—parents want to see the letter grades.

I scanned the card for the source of Leah's consternation. English: A. Math: A. Science: A. Social studies . . . hey, wait a minute . .

"Leah!" I said, "You got straight A's!"

She broke into a grin that threatened to leap off her face and take on a life of its own. "Fooled you!" she said.

"Why, you little . . . I hugged my daughter and stroked her hair. "I'll bet you don't do that to Mom."

"Sure I do."

I had made some tuna salad to put on a pumpernickel bagel, so I was nice about it and made sandwiches for Andrea and Howard, too. We sat down to eat at the kitchen table, and after Leah took a few bites of her peanut butter sandwich on bagel, I looked at Howard.

"So?" I asked.

He looked puzzled. "So, what?"

"So, is that the best bagel in the Western Hemisphere, or what?"

"It's good," he said with a note of wonderment at what all the fuss was about. Leah and I exchanged a look of exasperation and moved on.

Ethan barreled in when I was about halfway through my sandwich, and just as Dylan was coming down from upstairs. Dylan sneered in Ethan's direction, and Ethan, as was his habit, entirely ignored Dylan.

"Where's the report card?" I repeated.

Ethan reached into his backpack and produced it. He really hadn't looked at it before now, because he couldn't possibly have cared less about the grades he received. Ethan goes to school because we've told him he has to, and he's never questioned it. Success or failure at his classes is entirely irrelevant to him outside of his vague desire for us to be proud of him.

The scary part is that our son could probably be the valedictorian of his class if he had any desire whatsoever to excel in school. He is a very smart boy, and will someday be brilliant at . . . something. But his almost total lack of motivation makes him frustrating to deal with. Frankly, Ethan would rather be playing video games, and that's not unusual, but the fact is, he really *would* just play video games. Asperger's is all about being the same as other kids, only *more*.

Dylan was trying to sneak a look over my shoulder as I assessed the report card. I glanced at him to get him to back off, but he wouldn't. So I turned my back on my nephew and looked, but it was too late.

“A B-minus in science?” Dylan crowed. “In sixth grade? That’s the best you could do?”

Ethan doesn’t care about grades, but he knows about teasing, and has known about it since nursery school. He hasn’t gotten all that much better in dealing with it, and his AS started to flare up in its most visible forms: his face reddened, his eyes rolled up in their sockets, and his hands started to flap at his sides.

I turned to Dylan. “It’s really not your place,” I said. “I’m sure Ethan is good in subjects you have trouble with.”

“I get A’s in everything,” he said. I wanted to flap my arms and roll my eyes back, too, but somebody has to stay in control. I looked into the kitchen for Howard or Andrea, but they just sat and stared, chewing their sandwiches. Andrea was probably trying to figure out what the hole in the round Jewish bread was for.

“That’s really not the point,” I continued through tightly clenched teeth. “Don’t you think that—”

Ethan cut me off, furious. “Stop fighting my battles for me!” he yelled in my face. “I’m not a little kid anymore!”

Unfortunately, his outburst had more of an effect on me—I was stunned—than it did on his cousin. Dylan just chirped with an imitation of Ethan’s high-pitched voice, “I’m not a little kid anymore!”

It was too much. Ethan raised his hand to go for Dylan’s throat, and I caught it, holding his arm tightly. “Don’t do it, Ethan,” I said. “What you need . . . And that’s when it hit me. I let go of my son’s arm.

Andrea called to Dylan, gently, from the kitchen, and although he didn’t want to, he went to his mother. Ethan stared at me. “What? What do I need?” he asked.

Of course. It made sense this way. Worked for everybody. “What you need,” I told Ethan, “is to hang out with someone a little more like you.”

“Another Asperger’s kid?”

I nodded. “Sort of. How’d you like to spend part of your vacation investigating a murder with me?”

Visions of video games danced by his eyes and vanished. “Do I have to?” my son asked.

“Yes, I think you do.”

He rolled his eyes a little. “Okay. But not now, right?”

“No. Not now.”

“Okay.” He was halfway up the stairs before I could even blink.

Dylan was smirking at me from the kitchen, so instead of hitting him with a two-by-four, as I wanted to, I went inside and called Lydia Soriano at *Snapdragon* to give her an update.

“When will I have the story, Aaron?”

“When do you need it?”

“Next Wednesday is Christmas. How’s next Tuesday?”

“Um, how’s next Friday?” I countered.

“Aaron, this is a little five-hundred-word story you talked me into. The least you could do is get it in on time.”

“I think the mob’s involved.”

If I knew what Lydia looked like, I could have pictured her chewing over that piece of information. “Okay,” she said. “Make it seven hundred and fifty words. I’ll throw in another five-hundred dollars. And I’ll give you until Thursday.”

Chapter Three



“You want to take him with you on a murder investigation?” Abby was speaking quietly because her brother and Andrea were in the basement, and we were only one floor away. Abigail believes that sound travels through plaster and wood a heck of a lot more efficiently than it really does.

We were in our living room, ostensibly watching *Monk* on television. Tony Shalhoub is a genius. But we weren’t really paying attention.

“I just want him to come along with me when I’m talking to Justin Fowler. I think he and Ethan speak the same language, give or take some gunpowder, and he can really help me break through with him where I haven’t broken through before.” I was trying to ignore the fact that, sitting on the couch next to me, my wife was bundled up, sexier than most naked women.

She was making it easier than usual, staring at me as if I’d suggested we sacrifice our son to appease a vengeful god, and then go out for pizza. “You’re using your son as a lure,” she said. “You just want the story, and you don’t care how you get it.”

“Don’t be melodramatic. I’m not asking him to fly off with Victor Laszlo to serve the cause. He might even make a friend. Did you ever think of that?” I put my arm up over the back of the couch, as if it were encircling Abby. Like you did in the movies when you were sixteen.

“You want him to be friends with a boy ten years older than him who shot a man in cold blood?”

“Oh, come on, Abigail.” Tony Shalhoub was explaining how the murderer had clearly been a gymnast, and a left-handed one at that. The guy who played the serial killer who *didn’t* eat people in *Silence of the Lambs*, and who now plays Monk’s police captain employer, looked sufficiently impressed. “I wouldn’t bring Ethan there if I thought Justin had actually shot Michael Huston. But he can talk to Justin in a language I don’t

understand. If Justin were French, and I brought Ethan to translate for me, you wouldn't have a problem with that."

"Sure I would. He got a B-minus in French."

"Don't change the subject," I told her, as the guy from *Silence of the Lambs* (the actor's name is Ted Levine) had his assistant slap the cuffs on the murderer and lead him away. "Besides, I don't think it would be an awful thing to have Ethan and Dylan in separate buildings as much as possible until Wednesday." Not like I was counting the days or anything, but there were now five left.

While Tony visited his wife's gravesite, and I slipped my arm down and around my wife's shoulders, Abby momentarily paid closer attention to the screen. "Hey," she said. But she didn't make me move my arm.

"C'mere," I said, and kissed her, like I had wanted to do since, roughly, the moment we met. Okay, so I'd kissed Abby plenty of times since then, but that didn't mean I stopped wanting to kiss her more. Ever.

She wasn't in the mood for sentiment, though. The minute our lips were apart, her attention returned to her argument. "Are you going to take Ethan the next time you go to the gangster's house, too?"

"I should have known your brother would rat me out," I said, disgusted.

"I can't believe you were keeping it from me," she replied. "And besides, where was I supposed to think the dozen Sonny Amster bagels came from?"

"You're right," I told her, turning the TV off. "The only possible explanation for bagels in this house is that I was kidnapped by a gangster who refused to give the kids an autograph."

She stared at me, puzzled and annoyed. "You didn't tell me you were being threatened."

"I knew how you'd react. I was going to quit the story, no questions asked, but I couldn't leave Lori in it by herself. It might have put her in danger."

"You should have told me." It was her strongest argument, and she was going to get all she could out of it.

"Fine. I should have. You're right. But it wasn't Howard's place to do it for me."

Abby closed her eyes and leaned back on the sofa cushion. "Don't keep doing this, Aaron," she said. "It's like an early Oliver Stone movie, and I

don't want to be Charlie Sheen. Don't make this into a battle for my soul between you and Howard."

"Right now, I'd settle for your body," I told her.

Her eyes remained closed. "With a slick line like that, how could you possibly miss?"

I kissed her again. What the hell! She wasn't looking. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you. But don't think for one moment that this isn't a battle between your brother and me, and I'm not the one making it that way. At some point, you're going to have to take sides."

That opened her eyes. "You're asking me to choose between you and my brother?"

"No. I'm asking you to consider the idea that once in a while, I'm not the one who's wrong, and to back me up when that happens. That's what marriage is about, isn't it? Watching each other's backs?"

"You spend too much time watching my front," she said.

"I can't help it if you have a cute front."

"You are a walking, breathing hormone."

"And you love me for it," I tried. She smiled, but not happily.

"You want me to see this as an issue of loyalty to you and to Ethan, but it's not," Abby said. "You know perfectly well that I'd do anything for the two of you, and that's never a question, is it?"

I should have thought before I said, "It never has been."

Her eyebrows went up. "And now it is?"

Too late to back off now, I plunged ahead. "Maybe. You're so intent on getting your brother to approve of you—or maybe to approve of me—that you're losing sight of the people who approve of you without question."

"You're making more of this than there is," Abby argued. "I'm tired. You love me too much. I'm going to bed." I looked at her. "To sleep."

"I love you too much?"

"Too much for me to deal with right now." She got up and started for the stairs, then stopped and looked at me. "Are we having trouble with our marriage?" she asked.

My lips curled into a sneer. "Yeah. Let's get a divorce. Don't be an idiot."

She smiled. "That's what I thought. Good night, honey." And Abby walked upstairs.

The trouble with winter is that there's no baseball on television at night.

Chapter Four



Everyone slept in on Saturday morning, except me, of course. Normally, I sleep like a rock on the weekends (I believe that having to wake up before nine is a violation of the Constitution, but I'm too tired to do anything about it). But when my brain is working overtime, it wakes me up at ungodly hours like seven-thirty.

I had resolved, somewhere around four-thirty (my brain keeps time badly) that I'd have to make another try at being civil, at least toward Howard. Abby had been right—I'd gone into this situation with an awful attitude, and even if my brother-in-law wasn't helping, I wasn't exactly working up a sweat with my effort, either.

When I said "everyone slept in," of course, I wasn't referring to Howard and Andrea, whom I found fully dressed and at the breakfast table when I shuffled down in my sweatpants and hooded Rutgers sweatshirt. They had actually prepared food for themselves, which I decided to see as a conciliatory gesture, but none for anyone else, which I chose to ignore.

"Good morning," I said in a voice that sounded remarkably like my father's. Lately, I've been thinking of him whenever I'm forced to be cheerful, or when I get up out of a chair. Time was, I could do the latter without actually making an audible grunt.

Over my copy of the *Times*, Howard nodded (he had no interest in the Arts and Leisure section, but Andrea did). Recalling the scene we'd had at yesterday's breakfast, she looked at me as if I were a suspicious looking suitcase and she a package-sniffing German shepherd.

I'm not much for subtlety (you might have noticed), so I jumped right in: "Howard, Andrea," I said, sitting, "I know we've gotten off on the wrong foot since you've been here, and I'd like to start over again and see if we can do better. What do you say?"

They looked at each other with a "married couple" glance that indicated they had discussed this issue at length, and possibly had agreed upon a

response should this very situation arise. Howard nodded at his wife, then looked at me.

“That’s not really much of an apology, Aaron,” he said.

An apology? Was it *meant* as an apology? Biting my lower lip, I maintained my tone of reconciliation. “Well, I just think that maybe we’ve all done and said things we regret, and we should just turn the page and start clean.” And there are people who think I *wasn’t* cut out for a career in diplomacy.

“I don’t think *I’ve* said or done anything I regret,” Andrea said sniffily. “I’ve done nothing but try to support you and your family, Aaron, and I’ve been insulted and rebuffed at every turn.”

Rebuffed? Don’t you have to be buffed before you can be rebuffed? “I’m sorry you feel that way, Andrea,” I said, again sucking in my emotional gut, “but my point is that maybe we should try to start fresh, now.”

“Well, since we don’t feel we’ve done anything to merit a change in behavior, I guess the fresh start will have to be mostly on your end,” Howard pronounced.

“I guess,” I said, and got a plastic bag out of the drawer to walk Warren.

There *was* a reason for being nice to this man, but I just couldn’t remember what it was.

I picked the leash up off the table near the door, and Warren immediately leapt up and walked to me, tail wagging. It’s the one thing he’s really learned under our watch: leash means walk. And walk, in Warren’s world, is the closest thing to perfection on the planet. If he could eat steak off the sidewalk during a walk, his existence would be complete.

Bundled to the hilt and wearing sunglasses, I looked something like the *South Park* kid in the parka if he didn’t want to be recognized by his fans. Appropriately braced for the cold, Warren (who was, after all, wearing fur) and I headed outside.

It was something of a surprise to see Big, Bigger, and Biggest at strategic positions outside the house, in identical parkas and sunglasses. They looked like the Yukon Secret Service.

“What’s up, boys?” I said. “Mensa meeting just break up?”

“Mr. Shapiro wants us to watch you,” Big said.

“Watch me do what? I’m walking the dog.”

I walked down the front steps to the sidewalk as Bigger said, "He wants us to protect you."

"Protect me? Protect me from what? I thought the only person I had to be worried about was *him*."

Big shook his head slightly. "Need-to-know basis," he said.

That startled me. "Don't *I* need to know?" I said.

"No," Bigger said. Apparently, they were trading off the speaking parts today.

"Who needs to know more than me?"

"Mr. Shapiro," Big said. "And us, so we can protect you."

I figured it was better to have guys like this on your side than against you, so I shrugged. "Okay, then," I said. "Let's go. Warren's not going to wait all day."

Warren was growling a little, watching the three parka-ed wise-guys from the bagel capital of New Jersey. But he eventually managed to remember why he was outside, and started in on our usual route, happily wagging his tail and sniffing the frozen ground for the horrible tidbits he considers tasty treats. Don't ask.

The Supersized Trio created a perimeter, with Biggest in front, then Big and Bigger behind me and the dog. Biggest never turned around to look, but always knew when to stop for Warren to sniff vegetation or take care of his bladder.

"Are you guys always this surreptitious, or are you actually going to hand out 'I'm following Aaron Tucker' t-shirts later on?" I asked Big.

"Surreptitious?" Bigger asked.

Big smiled, this time in a less threatening manner. "He means, are we always this easy to spot?"

Bigger nodded. "Surreptitious," he said with an air of satisfaction.

"My wife's going to start asking if you'll be outside whenever I open the door," I said. "She got through law school, you know. She might be able to figure out you're not three Christmas trees."

"You'll never even know we're there," Big said.

"I don't like to destroy your illusions," I told him, "but when I walked out the door and the three of you were standing there with your hands in your pockets and your car in my driveway, I knew you were there."

"We wanted you to know we were there today," Bigger explained.

“From now on, you won’t know.”

“From now on? How long are you guys going to be following me around?”

Warren stopped to take care of his main business, and we stood for a while, four grown men trying not to look at a dog’s butt. “Until Mr. Shapiro tells us to stop,” Big said.

“Why does Mr. Shapiro think I’m in danger?” I asked. “Who would want to do me harm if they know he’s giving me protection?”

“I don’t ask questions,” Big said. Bigger looked annoyed that his turn to speak had been taken. “He says ‘watch you,’ we watch. He says ‘stop watching,’ we stop watching. Either way, you know you’re safe.”

“And my family?”

“We’re watching them, too,” said Bigger, making sure he took his turn this time. Warren finished up, I bagged what needed to be bagged, and we continued on our way.

“Don’t watch my wife too closely,” I said, suddenly feeling a little weird about this whole “watching” thing.

Big grinned. “You don’t let us have any fun.”

“This watching thing isn’t my idea,” I told him. “I don’t want my family weirded out, you hear? Will you be watching inside the house, too?” It suddenly occurred to me that Big, Bigger, and Biggest might be a little too close for comfort.

“Nah,” Bigger said. “If we’re watching the house, they can’t get in without us knowing.”

We turned the corner and headed back toward the house, our collective breath forming a cloud that made us look like an Al Capp cartoon. When we reached the house, I looked at them.

“I’m going inside now. You guys need anything? Coffee? Hot chocolate? I think I’ve got some bagels left.”

Big shook his head. “We’re fine. Don’t worry.”

“You going to need my bathroom?” How was I going to explain that to Abby?

Bigger shook his head this time. Apparently, they were taking turns on that, too. “We’re all set up. You’ll . . .

“ . . . never know you’re there. I got it. So you’re here to watch me and my wife and kids, right?”

“Right,” said Bigger.

“We have guests staying with us, you know,” I said.

“I know,” Big said. “We can protect them, too.”

I opened the front door and looked at them. “I wouldn’t worry too much about that,” I said, and went inside.

Chapter Five



Ethan woke up around ten and immediately went into his Saturday morning routine, which consists of a dizzying succession of cartoons, each timed to the minute, and remote control mastery, flitting back and forth between stations during commercial breaks that would shame the most accomplished of couch potatoes. He was still in his pajamas, which consisted of long flannel pants and a t-shirt, and probably wouldn't come down to eat until after noon.

I didn't tell Abby about my conversation with Howard, or about the service we were to receive from the Really Large Bodyguard Corporation, since I didn't understand either one, and didn't believe telling my wife would make her feel any better.

Leah was still in pajamas, too, and bouncing around the house in her usual Saturday morning routine, waiting for her friend Melissa, who lives across the street, to wake up. Melissa doesn't generally wake up until a bucket of cold water is thrown upon her, at which time her front window shades are raised—the Midland Heights equivalent of Bob Woodward moving the red flag on his terrace for “Deep Throat.”

The local YM/YWHA was being renovated so it could more plausibly raise its membership rates, and was closed, so we had installed in our basement the home version of the elliptical trainer I use there. The words “home version” are apropos, since the in-home elliptical is to exercise what the “home version” of the “Jeopardy! Game” is to playing for real money with Alex Trebec. It's fun, but you don't really get the same rewards.

I got on the elliptical while I had a window of opportunity (Howard and Andrea were upstairs, probably tattling on me to Abby) and did a quick 30 minutes, which is exactly the same amount of time as a slow 30 minutes, but uses up more calories. When I was finished punishing myself for enjoying food, I trudged upstairs and went right to my bedroom to get ready for the shower I desperately needed. It might not be the professional

version, but the elliptical trainer had me sweating to the point where I hadn't noticed how cold my basement was for the last 20 minutes of the workout.

Our bedroom is directly across from Ethan's, so I closed our door while dressing after my shower. Since the walls are nice thick plaster, but the doors are cheap, hollow wood, I could hear something going on outside the bedroom door almost as if I were actually in the hall.

Apparently, Dylan was taunting Ethan about his choice in television programming, which is a hair short of telling Ethan that his life is meaningless and besides, he's ugly.

"This is a baby show," Dylan said, voice full of contempt. "Nobody but babies watches this show."

Kids make fun of Ethan a lot. Classmates imitate his hand gestures and the way he rolls his eyes when upset. Others simply try to provoke those responses by teasing him the way all kids tease all other kids, only more. So he's used to teasing. And for the most part, he's learned to deal with it relatively well. You can call him names, you can insult him, you can challenge his very reason for existence.

But question his choice of television programs, and you're practically begging for violence.

I could hear Ethan's teeth clench. Sometimes, his reactions to stressful situations are so much like mine I find them unbearable. "This is *not* a baby show," he said in a tone that said more than his words.

"Sure it is," his cousin plowed on, "and you like it because you're a *baby*. You act like a six-year-old, and you're really twelve. You—"

"*This is not a baby show!*" Ethan screamed. I knew what that tone meant, and I struggled to get my pants on as I scrambled for the door.

When I opened the door, I saw Ethan with his hands on Dylan's throat, choking him for all he was worth. I was a choker when I was a kid, too, but I learned to stop when I was much younger than Ethan. I burst out of the bedroom and ran to the two of them as quickly as I could, separating them physically.

"Ethan Atticus Tucker!" I yelled, not thinking.

Dylan didn't even wait to catch his breath. "Atticus?" he crowed. "Atticus? Your middle name is *Atticus*?"

Ethan wheeled and stared at me with a horrible look of betrayal in his eyes. “What did you *do*?” he said to me.

There are times as a parent when you wish you could rewind the past five seconds or so, but even when your methodology is wrong, your reasons are usually justifiable. I knew I’d messed up in front of Ethan’s most relentless tormentor, but I couldn’t let him run around choking the life out of people, either.

“Ethan,” I said. “You can’t put your hands on other people like that.”

Dylan, his fear ebbing, was already grinning an evil grin. “Do you know your initials are EAT?” he said.

“Dylan,” I said, turning toward him. “Ethan can’t choke you like that, but I know how you tease him, and I heard what you were saying. You have to stop treating him like that, and I mean *now*.”

“I don’t have to listen to you,” the kid sneered. “You’re not my father.”

I couldn’t react in time. “I am,” said the voice from behind me. “What happened?”

Howard and Abby were on the stairs leading up to our bedrooms. Howard was grimacing because his son was being scolded by his brother-in-law, and Abby was grimacing because I hadn’t made the bed, and now Howard would know what a slob she was.

“He choked me!” Dylan wailed, playing to the crowd. “I didn’t do *anything*, and he choked me!”

“Ethan!” Abigail said. “Did you choke him?”

“Well . . . Ethan couldn’t decide who was going to defend him, since I had already betrayed him, and his mother wasn’t sounding a whole lot friendlier.

“You did,” she gasped.

“Abby,” I said. “You know perfectly well how this kind of thing goes. Dylan—”

“I don’t think you need to step in, Aaron,” Howard said, cutting me off. “My son is being strangled, and I come up here to find you scolding him.”

I looked at Howard, then at Abigail, knowing she didn’t want me to escalate the battle, but hoping she’d at least take Ethan’s side, if not mine. Howard looked at her, too.

“Ethan,” she said slowly. “You are not allowed on your PlayStation until Dylan goes home.”

Coming from his mother, this was a devastating blow. Ethan knew he couldn't expect more lenient treatment from me, since I always back Abby up. Besides, she's usually the one talking me down from an unreasonable punishment, so this was doubly hopeless for him.

Ethan's eyes widened, and became a little damp. "Mom . . . he said.

"Ethan," I said, "don't say anything without an attorney present."

"I am an attorney," said his mother.

"I mean one on *his* side," I snapped.

She looked at me as if I'd slapped her. Before Ethan could actually break down and cry in front of Dylan and lose face even further, I gestured to him.

"Come on," I said. "We need to go find a killer."

Strangely, he followed me, and Abby and Howard retreated to the living room to let us through. Abigail and I were exchanging looks we don't usually give each other, with the promise that our next private conversation would not be pillow talk. I got an apple out of the fridge for Ethan, and made sure he dressed and put on his coat before we left the house. Not a word was said by anyone, except Leah, who kept asking everyone what was going on and not getting any answers.

I didn't say much on the way to Mary Fowler's house, and if you don't talk to Ethan under circumstances like that, he won't start a conversation on his own. If you don't want to talk about *Yu-Gi-Oh!* or *Dracula*, he's pretty much exhausted his topics of conversation, anyway. For an AS kid, many times not interacting with people is just the easiest (and to be honest, most natural) thing to do.

I, meanwhile, was considering how expertly I'd screwed up my promise to Abby that I'd try to quell my dislike for her brother and his family. Virtually every time she'd seen me with them since their arrival, I'd been argumentative, sarcastic, or downright confrontational. In her eyes, I'd been the exact opposite of what she'd asked me to be.

On the other hand, I had to admit that Abby wasn't totally blamefree. It was one thing to leave me to my own devices against her brother, since I'm a grownup (sort of) and can take care of myself (*see previous parenthetical expression*). But throwing Ethan to the wolves was another story. His mother should have defended him, or at least gotten his side of the story, before pulling the plug on the center of his life. Sure, I threaten to do that

all the time, but I never actually shut him down, and when the punishment comes from Abby, there's no appeals process. Ethan knows that.

He was in the seat next to me, muttering to himself (he doesn't really talk to himself, but makes sounds in his mouth he thinks you can't hear), no doubt going over what had happened on the stairs. He couldn't make sense of it, either.

"I'll talk to Mom later," I said.

"Huh?" He hadn't been listening to me. What's going on in his head is more important than anything out on planet Earth.

"I said, 'I'll talk to Mom later.' Maybe I can get your sentence lessened a little."

"Yeah." Ethan doesn't come to "thanks" easily. But luckily, we were coming up on the Fowler house.

I had told Mary to expect us, but hadn't told her the exact time we'd arrive. Still, she answered the door quickly and welcomed Ethan warmly. Justin, she told us, was in his room, and I walked over and knocked on the door.

"Yes?"

"Justin, it's Aaron Tucker." I hoped that wouldn't cause him to barricade the door, and it seemed not to have any effect at all.

"Yes?"

As long as I had him saying "yes," I might as well ask him for something. "I brought someone to meet you. May we come in?"

"Okay." Hey, it wasn't "yes," but it had the same effect. Justin unlocked his door, and I crooked a finger to Ethan, who looked a little uncomfortable, but walked toward me. When the door opened, Ethan stood a little behind me, wanting me to shield him from a guy he'd never met.

To Ethan, Justin was a grownup. To me, he was barely older than Ethan. It's all how you look at things.

"Justin," I said, "this is my son Ethan. Ethan, that's Justin."

"Hi," Ethan said. He's learned he's supposed to do that when he meets someone new.

"Uh-huh." Justin might be a little farther down the continuum than Ethan. There are degrees of everything, and no two people are alike.

"So, did you kill that guy?" he asked, breaking the ice with a sledgehammer rather than a well-placed pick and a little melting action.

Ethan's social skills needed a little work.

We walked into Justin's room. Mary had winced at the question, but it didn't seem to bother Justin at all. I guess he'd been asked it so much lately, he had a conditioned response all set, and people with AS love nothing better than a conditioned response.

"Yeah."

Ethan's eyes widened a little, but he nodded. "Why?"

That seemed to take Justin by surprise. "I don't know," he answered. What did that mean? That he killed Michael Huston and didn't know why, or that the people who had told him to confess to the crime hadn't bothered giving him a motivation?

"That's pretty weird," Ethan said.

"Yeah," Justin agreed.

Ethan looked around the room. "You don't have any video games?" he said.

"No. I don't like them. The guns don't operate realistically." Justin's reasons for likes and dislikes centered around his special interest.

Since Ethan's special interest is more vague—he's into video games and TV shows—it's easier for him to relate to other things, but not as much as people who don't have AS.

"My dad says you really like guns. How come you like guns so much?" Ethan asked.

Mary and I stayed in the doorway, but Justin and Ethan were acting like we weren't there, so it didn't seem to matter much.

"I don't know," Justin said. "Guns are just so cool. They do exactly what they're supposed to do." This is key in the Asperger world—you can depend on something to be predictable, to be exactly what you expect it to be all the time. There's great comfort in that. Little kids who have AS often don't like toys that start out as one thing and transform into something else—they find that upsetting.

"How'd you get the old gun, the one that guy got shot with?" Nice question, Ethan. Something I've been wondering myself.

"I don't know," Justin said. For a guy who knew a lot, he didn't seem to know much about the most crucial night of his life. "I just found it here in my room that day."

I blinked a couple of times. "Wait a minute, Justin," I said. "You mean the gun just *showed up* here in your room on the very day Michael Huston was shot?"

Justin looked startled, having forgotten the adults in the room. His mouth opened and closed a couple of times, and Ethan gave me a look that said, "Nice work, Dad."

"I . . . I . . . I . . .

"Did it have, like, ammo and everything with it when you found it?" Ethan had made a remarkable leap of understanding, something he wasn't supposed to be able to do, exhibiting something close to empathy. It was my turn to be startled, but would Ethan's questioning work?

"The black powder and the ball were there," Justin said. "I had to come up with my own fabric patch, but that was easy. I just cut a corner off my pillow case."

Ethan closed the door to the room so they wouldn't be further disturbed by the clumsy adults, and I marveled again at his read of the situation. This boy had potential I hadn't recognized before.

Mary looked at me a moment, and gestured toward the living room. We headed in that direction.

"Your son is quite remarkable," she said. "You said he has Asperger's too?"

I nodded. "Yes, but he's surprising me in there. Sometimes, you don't know your own children as well as you think."

I hadn't intended that to sound the way it did, and Mary looked at the floor a moment. "I'm sorry," I said. "That came out wrong."

"It's all right," she answered. "You didn't mean it like that. But it's been very difficult."

We sat on the sofa again, and I decided that if my son was making progress with Justin in the other room, he had damn well better have something to report when we got back into the car, or I'd never live it down. "Have you heard from Kevin?" I asked Mary.

She nodded. "Yes, he's back in Indiana," she said. "He has exams, so he rode the bike all night and he's back there. He said he'd come home as soon as exams are over."

"Did he say if he placed Justin's bail?"

“All he said was that I shouldn’t worry about it,” she answered. “I don’t like the way that sounds.”

Exams? This close to Christmas? That didn’t seem very American. This country comes to such a grinding halt at Yuletide that if aliens arrived from space on or near December 25th, we’d probably ask them to come back after New Year’s. But I didn’t press the point with Mary.

“What does Justin’s lawyer say?” My first rule is: if the conversation gets uncomfortable, and that’s not what you’re going for, change the subject. Okay, maybe that’s not the *first* rule, but it’s a rule.

“That I should have Justin declared incompetent, and then contend he’s not able to stand trial.” Mary’s contempt for that idea was evident in her voice. “Justin’s different, but he’s not incompetent.”

“It’s never easy, is it?” I said, implicitly offering support as one Asperger parent to another.

“It never is,” she agreed. “Justin’s father left when he was six and Kevin was three. He couldn’t take the way Justin was. He didn’t want to accept the fact that it wasn’t anyone’s fault . . . because if there really was something wrong with Justin, he figured maybe it had come from him. And that wasn’t going to be the truth, no matter what.”

On first diagnosis of AS, a lot of parents go into denial, and most of them come out of it eventually. Some don’t. Most of the ones who go into denial, I’m afraid, are fathers. Sometimes, I’m not especially proud of my gender.

“I feel like apologizing for all fathers,” I told Mary.

“Don’t,” she said. “He wasn’t a nice guy before, either.” And then she didn’t say anything for a few moments.

“How do you think Justin got the gun?” I asked.

“I have no idea,” Mary said after a thought. “He’s been consistent in saying he found it in his room, but I know that’s not true. He’s covering something up, but that’s the confusing part. It’s not like him. He doesn’t have enough guile to be deceptive in any real way.”

“Does he have any friends—anybody who might be using him to cover up for themselves?” A kid with Asperger’s in the Midwest almost took the rap for counterfeiting because guys he thought were his friends told him he wouldn’t get into trouble. Another young man, in England, took “samples”

home from his job at the jewelry store because “friends” thought it would be a good idea. But Mary shook her head, “no.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I said nothing. Meanwhile, raucous laughter from Justin’s room convinced me the guys were getting along just fine.

“Sounds like they’ve found some common ground,” Mary said.

“Justin seems like a nice kid,” I told her, and she looked surprised.

“A lot of parents wouldn’t want their son to hang around with an accused murderer,” she said, reminding me of Abby’s comments the night before.

“If I thought he was a murderer, I wouldn’t be crazy about it, either,” I told her. “I just wish I could figure some of this out.”

The door to Justin’s room opened, and Ethan walked out, still doing that high-pitched braying he thinks sounds like a laugh. Asperger’s kids sometimes simulate the emotions they think they’re supposed to be having, and Ethan had gotten into the habit of pretending to laugh. By now, it was hard to tell these attempts from the real thing.

“See you, Justin,” he said over his shoulder.

“Uh-huh,” came the response.

Ethan walked to me and tapped me on the shoulder like he was Jimmy Cagney and I was Pat O’Brien or some other sidekick in this picture.

“We found out what we need to here,” he said. “Let’s go see the widow.”

Chapter Six



“Justin didn’t find the gun in his room,” Ethan told me in the car. “He didn’t?” I was reduced to straight lines like this because I was stunned by my son’s newfound ability to take command of a situation.

“No. He found it in the base of the grandfather’s clock in his living room, and he found it there after the guy was shot. He didn’t want to tell anybody because he figured whoever left it there would get into trouble.”

It certainly wasn’t Mary Fowler, and if Justin hadn’t put the gun there himself, that left only Kevin. But Kevin was in Indiana, right?

“What was he doing looking in the grandfather clock?” I asked.

“He and his brother used to hide things in there when they were little, and Justin hides some magazines from his mom in there.” I didn’t need to ask what kind of magazines. Hormones do not discriminate against people with AS.

“How did you get him to tell you this?” I asked Ethan, genuinely interested.

“It was easy,” he said. “I just got him talking about guns, because that’s what he likes.”

“When I got him talking about guns, he wouldn’t tell me anything,” I told Ethan.

“You’re a grownup,” my son informed me. Strangely, it was the first time I’d been accused of such a thing in quite some time.

“Why are we going to Karen Huston’s house?” I asked. Amazingly, I’d been recast. No longer in the role of Sam Spade, I was now playing Dr. Watson to my son’s Sherlock Holmes.

“We need to find out why she thinks her husband was in the Mafia.” Ethan hadn’t ever seen the *Godfather* movies or *The Sopranos*, so his view of organized crime came from Fat Tony on *The Simpsons* and Edward G. Robinson parodies in Bugs Bunny cartoons. Pop culture references guide our lives—and his, too.

“Why? I’ve talked to the gangsters, and *I* think her husband was involved with them. What difference does it make why *she* thinks so?”

He glossed over the idea that his father had been consorting with gangsters, since he wasn’t really listening to what I was saying.

“Because she’s hiding something,” my son said.

“And you think you can get her to tell you.”

“Justin told me.”

“Justin has Asperger’s. You know how to talk to him. What are you going to say to Mrs. Huston?”

But he had lapsed back into mumbling to himself. I caught the words “Spider-Man” and “evil plot.”

After about five minutes of self-immersion, he turned to me abruptly. “Why doesn’t Dylan like me?” he asked.

“What makes you think . . .

“*Dad*,” he said, exasperated.

“Okay,” I admitted. “Dylan doesn’t like you. Do you like Dylan?”

He thought about it. “I don’t know Dylan,” he concluded. “Dylan doesn’t like you because he doesn’t know you, either,” I said.

“I’m not always making fun of him,” he pointed out.

I sighed. “We’ve talked about this before, Ethan,” I said. “People make fun of what they don’t understand. Dylan thinks you’re weird, and he can’t figure out why, so he makes himself feel better by making fun of you. There’s not much we can do about it except point out when he’s being a jerk.”

“He’s always being a jerk.”

“Maybe you do know if you don’t like Dylan.” He laughed.

Ethan was silent the rest of the way to Karen Huston’s house. He didn’t mutter, either. I think he was digesting. I know I was.

Karen was, naturally, surprised to see us, since I hadn’t known we were coming, either. I was surprised, because Rezenbach was there, dressed in a way he must have considered casual—a blue blazer, gray slacks, and a light blue button-down shirt. He had clearly lightened up by not wearing a tie. It would be rude to say he looked as relaxed as Jackie Mason at a Hitler Youth rally. So I won’t say it.

I was too busy, anyway, wondering what Karen’s lawyer was doing in her house on a Saturday, dressed like he was about to go cruising with his

wife Lovey, Gilligan, and the Skipper, too.

There wasn't much time to think about that, because Dalma was advancing on me. This time, though, the dog wasn't growling, wasn't baring teeth, wasn't even looking the least bit adversarial. In fact, bouncing toward Ethan and me, she looked downright friendly.

"Don't worry about her," Karen said. "She knows you now. It usually takes three or four visits, and then she's your best friend."

"She doesn't know *me*," my son helpfully pointed out. There is no one better than a twelve-year-old with Asperger's at puncturing any sense you might have that you know anything.

"She loves kids," Karen said. "She likes them the first time she meets them. And she can spot the mean ones, so I know she's going to like you."

Ethan got down on his knees and, sure enough, the dog came over and licked his face, which made my son laugh. Then, amazingly, the dog walked over to me and did everything but beg for a pat, so I provided one. Suddenly, she was such a close friend I expected Dalma to ask me out for a beer after work.

Rezenbach, however, was more likely to invite me in for an arsenic. "I have to protest, *again*, Mr. Tucker, your insistence on questioning my client when I'm not present, and when we haven't had any advance notice."

"The last time, Mr. Rezenbach, your client called me and asked me to question her. This time, I had to acquiesce to someone with considerably more influence over me than you have."

"And who is that?"

"My son," I told him. I was looking directly into his eyes and strangely, he didn't seem outraged. His eyes actually softened a bit. Maybe a human being was actually in there trying to find a way out.

"I don't understand," was all the lawyer said.

"Ethan has a certain understanding of this case," I said within my son's earshot. "He has been helping me in the investigation of the story, and he has some questions for Karen that can help clear up Michael's murder."

Karen, to her credit, did not condescend. Ethan, still petting the dog, literally rose to his new status—he stood up. Karen nodded, and said to Ethan, "Sit down. Ask whatever you like."

The dog, tail wagging shamelessly, followed us into the living room and sat at Ethan's left hand, hoping to be stroked, but not realizing that the

concentration of the Asperger's boy would allow for only one area of interest at a time. Still, she sat hopefully, grinning and waiting.

Another major trait of people with AS: their total indifference toward small talk. "Why was your husband walking the dog that night?" Ethan asked. "Why not you?" He knew that in our house, Abigail usually walks the dog at night. Still, it hadn't occurred to me to ask.

"I would wake up before Michael in the morning, so I walked Dalma before breakfast," Karen said. "After dinner was his turn."

"And how did the dog get back after your husband got killed?" Perhaps charm school *was* an option for the boy.

Karen, to her credit, did not flinch. "Dalma knew the way back, and she came running as soon as it happened," she said. "She must have bitten the person who . . . did it, because she had a little blood around her mouth. It was how I knew something was wrong, when the dog came home alone." Karen turned her head toward the window for a moment, and I think Dalma whimpered a bit.

Ethan, who has seen more television in his lifetime than most ninety-year-olds, spends the bulk of his time on what we shall call the more animated forms of entertainment, so the intricate points of forensic science are lost on him. Blood spatter, DNA, semen samples: alas, all these were foreign to my son, the poor deprived child. Or at least I thought so, until he said, "Did the blood on the dog's mouth match Justin Fowler's?"

Karen shook her head slowly. "Dalma had licked the blood off her mouth before the police got here. It never occurred to me to save some. I wasn't thinking straight."

I knew Justin Fowler didn't appear to have any recent bite marks on his hands, or anywhere else I could see, but that was not, in itself, physical evidence. Aside from Karen's word for it, there was no proof the dog had bitten anyone.

"Mrs. Huston," my son said politely, "who hated your husband so much he'd kill him?"

Rezenbach wanted to go into apoplexy, but a twelve-year-old kid with Asperger's asking questions in the most innocent tone imaginable didn't make that a realistic option. He puffed out his lips a couple of times, but never really managed a sound.

Karen looked Ethan straight in the eye. “I don’t know anyone who even *disliked* him, Ethan,” she said. “I’m sorry I can’t help you.”

“No, Mrs. Huston,” said the “afflicted” boy. “I’m sorry I can’t help you.”

The dog wagged her tail appealingly when we stood, and Rezenbach even shook hands with Ethan, although I’m sure he went to wash off the AS the minute we left. Karen thanked Ethan for his concern, and we bundled ourselves up against the light breeze, which threatened to push the Pocono Mountains straight into New Jersey if it didn’t abate soon.

In the car, while I fumbled with the heater (pushing the fan button in the minivan up to maximum), Ethan sighed and looked back at the house.

“She’s still hiding something,” he said. Then he sat back and started making noises under his breath again.

Chapter Seven



“What you said was hurtful.”

Abby had waited all evening, through a very tense dinner, to find an excuse to lure me to the basement. The rest of the family, extended and otherwise, was upstairs, participating in various activities, all of which involved electronic devices.

“I know,” I answered. “I’m sorry. I’ve felt bad about it all day.”

“The problem is,” she went on as if I hadn’t spoken, “you were right.”

That I hadn’t expected, and when I turned to face her, I nearly tripped over the ancient assemble-it-yourself end table we use down there.

“I was *what*?”

“You were right. I wasn’t even listening to Ethan’s side of the story. I was acting differently than I normally do because Howard was there. I’ve been that way since he arrived.” Abby’s face was sad, and that’s the last thing on this earth I want to see. I walked to her and embraced her, and she put her head down on my shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” she said finally. Her voice was a little shaky, but I don’t think she was crying.

“You don’t have to apologize to me,” I told her. “I’m as guilty as you are, if not more. But you do need to talk to your son.”

“I already have. I reduced his sentence to no PlayStation tonight, and Dylan can’t use it either.”

I leaned back and looked at her. “Howard agreed to that?”

She put on a grin I’ve never actually seen before, one that had a touch of naughty little girl in it. “Howard wasn’t consulted.”

I hugged her closer, which is what I always want to do anyway. “Good for you,” I said. “You’re finally growing up.”

“Yeah,” my wife said with a touch of pride in her voice.

“Any chance you can teach me how?”

“That, my love, is a lost cause.” She grinned at me. “And I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

It would have been the perfect place for a big kiss and a Hollywood ending, which reminded me that, with four days left before I had to put up or shut up, I hadn’t done any work on the screenplay yet. So I leaned in for the kiss of the century.

And naturally, the phone rang.

Within a heartbeat, Leah was at the top of the stairs yelling down.

“Dad! It’s Uncle Mahoney!”

Natch. Up the stairs, away from a kiss that might have been sung about by villagers for centuries to come, and toward a conversation with a humongous rental mechanic. Life causes us to make odd choices sometimes.

“What’s up?” I started. There were lips warming up for me in the basement, and no time to waste.

“I have a plan,” came the response. “A very famous plan.”

Chapter Eight



The next day was Sunday, when Mahoney and his tormentor didn't work, and when we couldn't put into action the Very Famous Plan (it's a reference to the Beatles movie *Help!*, and I'm sorry, but you'll have to take my word for how funny it is). So, having worked out the details on the phone Saturday night, we arranged to meet Monday morning at the appointed place and time.

Sunday morning, I took a chance that the North Brunswick Police Department wasn't terribly used to dealing with murders, and might have their detectives working overtime. I called Rodriguez. And he was there. Score one for diligence and hunches.

"Is there something I can do for you, Tucker? Because I sure am feeling underworked here." Rodriguez was so good at playing the TV detective, I thought of asking Waterman to cast him in the movie I hadn't rewritten yet.

"It's nice to talk to you, too, Lieutenant. Should I ask if you've caught any 'skells' today, or gotten someone 'jammed up'? I just love to hear you guys talk the talk."

"Is there a reason I'm talking to you today, when I should be home with my family?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," I answered. "I have a couple of questions. Was there any indication that Michael Huston's dog had bitten someone the night of the murder?"

"No," he said after a moment. "Why?"

"Karen Huston says the dog came back to the house with blood on her mouth."

"First I'm hearing about it. Any clothing fibers, hairs, anything like that?"

"Not that I know of," I told him. "She was pretty upset, as you might imagine, and maybe wasn't thinking clearly."

"I'll check into it," he said. "Even tips from someone like you have to get investigated in a murder."

It's touching when public servants take you seriously.

"Something else you might want to check up on," I told him. "Justin Fowler says he found the gun in a hiding place he and his brother used when they were kids. But Kevin was supposedly in Indiana at college when the weapon was found. Can you . . .

"We've already checked the phone records," Rodriguez said.

"Believe it or not, occasionally the cops do a better job of crime detection than electronics writers."

"So?"

"So, what?"

"So, what did the phone records show?"

"Kevin Fowler called his mother three times the week before the murder. Each of the calls came from a number in Muncie, Indiana. No mistake."

"Any possibility the calls could have been from someone else at the same number, or does he have a cell phone that carries an Indiana exchange?"

"Wow, if only we'd thought to check that!" Rodriguez marveled. "Damn, I'm going to have to go back to the Police Academy for lessons from freelance writers!"

"Okay, Rodriguez, you win the Sarcasm Ribbon for the year. Feel better? Now, what about the phone number?"

"His cell phone is a Jersey number. Whether or not it was Fowler himself on the line, I can't possibly know. We didn't have a tap on the line."

"Okay, how about this: any news on who might have put up the money for Justin's bail?"

Rodriguez paused a moment, perhaps trying to come up with exactly the right sardonic tone to take. "The fact is, Tucker, I have confidential sources that indicate Justin's bail money came from a . . . local businessman."

Whoa.

"You mean Justin Fowler was bailed out of jail by Hyman Shapiro?"

Rodriguez didn't answer, and in that, there was answer enough.

To tell the truth, I would have preferred the sarcasm.

Chapter Nine



“You’d have been so proud of your son yesterday,” I told Abby that night as we were finding the bed under the pile of laundry I’d dumped there.

I’m the person who stays home most of the time, and I do the laundry in my family. I realize I’m supposed to be somehow ashamed of this strike against my manhood, but the truth is, I don’t mind doing the laundry for the family. In fact, I kind of like doing the laundry for the family, and can’t figure out how, in the modern age, this is somehow thought of as a feminine function. We have washing machines and automatic dryers, don’t we? What are guys better at than playing with machines?

The part I don’t like is folding the damn laundry after it comes out of the dryer, and putting the newly clean clothes away. So I tend to leave the whole pile on our bed, and put it off until the last minute, which is when Abby and I are ready to get into said bed. This forces the issue, and on more occasions than not, prompts my wife to help me fold. Since there is no machine involved, folding, in my opinion, is a unisex activity.

“Really?” she said, forcing me back on topic. “He’d make a good reporter, you think?”

“I don’t know about that, since I’ve read his English homework,” I said. “He writes good poetry, which I could never do, but his prose is, let’s say, uninspired. What I’m saying is that he exhibited excellent investigative skills, and *people* skills, that you wouldn’t have expected.”

“I wouldn’t have expected *any* people skills,” Abby answered honestly. Perhaps this is the place to note we try to be as clear-eyed and objective about our children, and particularly Ethan, as we can be.

“I don’t know if it’s all the social skills training,” I said, trying to match some of the four million athletic socks in all sizes that had taken over my sleeping area, “but he assessed the situation, asked the important questions, and got answers I might not have gotten. I don’t know if it’s because he’s a cute twelve-year-old boy . . .

“A *gorgeous* twelve-year-old boy,” my wife corrected. Okay, so we’re *mostly* clear-eyed and objective.

“. . . but Karen Huston really took him seriously. And I really don’t think Justin Fowler cared if Ethan was *gorgeous* or not.”

Aha! Two socks with the same stripes! But they were different sizes. Curse you, Hanes Hosiery!

“You think maybe we could start buying distinctive socks for each family member, so I can tell the difference between my socks and Ethan’s?” I asked.

“What difference does it make?” Abby said. “They’re all clean. Divide them up equally and take half.”

I chose not to comment on such a revolting suggestion, and went on. “Anyway, I was impressed, and I told him so,” I said.

“I’m still not comfortable with you involving Ethan in this story,” Abby said, successfully pairing up three matching pairs without even breathing hard. “You’ve already been abducted once. And there were those three men. Thank goodness they haven’t come back.”

If I didn’t correct her, I would have been party to a direct lie, and I can’t do that to Abby with any real conviction—or hope of keeping all my body parts intact. “There’s something I haven’t told you . . . I began.

Immediately, she turned from the Spider-Man t-shirt she was folding, her eyes narrowing. “What?” she asked. So I told her about the subsequent sighting of the Three Unwise Men, and the conversation I’d had with Big.

“What is it we’re supposed to need protection *from*?” she asked when I was finished, her voice barely under control.

“I have no idea,” I told her honestly. “They wouldn’t tell me. Personally, I think it’s just Shapiro’s way of keeping an eye on me. I can’t think of anyone else who might be coming after me.”

She gave me an Abby stare. “You should have told me.”

“I *did* tell you. I just waited a day until I did.”

“Nice tap dancing.”

“And they say we Jewish men have no rhythm,” I told her. She made a face at me.

We’d finally completed the folding, and had organized the laundry into four piles, one for each family member. I had drawn the line at doing Howard’s laundry, although the suggestion had been made implicitly.

I took my pile, which consisted mostly of socks and underwear, and stored it in the three-drawer bachelor's chest on my side of the bed. Abigail stashed her considerably more eclectic stack in the Ikea armoire I'd assembled for her. Storage space in Midland Heights is a commodity just a hair less precious than a 1951 Mickey Mantle rookie baseball card.

The children's clothing piles were taken off our bed and placed on the floor, to be distributed in the morning. With that done, we were finally ready to actually climb into bed, which we did.

"I don't like it when you keep things from me that could be dangerous," Abby said as she turned off the light over her head.

"I don't know what to do about it," I said. "I have no idea what the danger is. What should I have told you—'watch out for . . . something?' I'd sound like the guy in charge of Homeland Security: 'The threat level today is magenta. Dress accordingly.'"

"Just promise me you'll let me know when to wear the Kevlar vest to work, okay?" Abby likes to stay fashion conscious.

"It'll look sexy on you, no matter what," I told her.

There was a long silence while my wife didn't laugh.

"Okay," I said. "I promise."

She reached out a hand and touched my arm, which on a slow night can be enough for me. Suddenly, Abby was kissing me and holding me close. "Come here," she said.

I did, but not without the obligatory mock horror. "But dear," I said, "company's in the house."

"Screw 'em," she said.

"Sorry," I said. "I've had a better offer."

Chapter Ten



Sitting in a cold car on Easton Avenue in New Brunswick, I couldn't remember why I had agreed to the Very Famous Plan in the first place. The idea of turning the car off, so as to draw less attention, was Mahoney's, and the fact that his van was allowed to run its heater the whole time I was freezing various useful parts of my anatomy off was not warming my heart, or for that matter, my right hand, either.

"Be a man," Mahoney taunted me from his cell phone. "Live with a little adversity."

"Easy for you to say," I reminded him. "You're in the warm glow of a large, heated vehicle. I'm living like a homeless man, but without seventeen layers of clothing."

The target vehicle, which Mahoney had finished repairing ten minutes ago, was a late model Chevrolet Cavalier, the very definition of Generic Car. It had suffered an electrical problem that disabled not only its ignition, but also its power windows, which had left the driver with his window down while waiting for the rental crew to pick him up before the repair. At this moment, I could sympathize.

"You've had it far too easy for far too long," Mahoney continued. "You never even commute out of your house."

I was looking at Thomas Sweets, the ice cream parlor on Easton that under normal circumstances would be, for me, an absolute haven. "Mr. Sweets," as it's known at my house, makes the best chocolate chip cookie ice cream in the universe. A shame you couldn't put it on a Sonny Amster bagel, but there are limits. Anyway, at that moment, the thought of ice cream was just making me colder.

"For someone who never leaves the house," I told him, "I've been following you around in a decrepit minivan an awful lot lately."

"Welcome to the real world, pal," he said.

“If this is the real world, can I go back to the Matrix? I think I took the wrong pill.”

This hilarity threatened to go unchecked until a late model Honda Civic approached the Chevy, and the single occupant got out to open the hood.

“He’s here,” I told Mahoney as quickly as I could.

“On my way,” he said.

Grateful to the intruder, I started the minivan, flooding its interior with, um, slightly less frigid air (I had been meaning to get Mahoney to take a look at the heater). In a flash, I had taken another sip of my recently hot chocolate and watched intently. My part in the Very Famous Plan at this point was to sit tight and watch. Which had also been my part up until now, so I was getting good at it.

Within seconds, Mahoney pulled the van, which he had parked around the corner, back onto Easton. The street, a main drag near the Rutgers College campus, was crowded at eleven in the morning, but he quickly managed to get close to the rental car and cut off the tormentor’s chance of escape. That was Mahoney’s role in the Very Famous Plan.

But before he could get out of the van and confront the saboteur, the Mole took option B, which we had outlined during the Very Famous Planning.

He looked, saw Mahoney, and decided to abandon the car. In other words, he just ran away.

Mahoney gave me a nod and put the van into gear. He followed the Mole around the corner onto Somerset Street, going north toward College Avenue. My role now was to pull out of the parking space I had near the Rutgers garage, past Noodle Gourmet, and block the saboteur’s car so he couldn’t double back.

I pulled out, but was blocked by a student in a car much fancier than mine, who was blasting rap music and talking on his cell phone. His bumper sticker read, “Mean People Suck.”

Unable to go forward, I tried to back up, but had parked in too tight a space to make it feasible. Meanwhile, just as Mahoney had feared, the Mole got him to cross the street onto Somerset, committing Mahoney to that direction, and then doubled back on foot toward the rental car he had driven here.

I pulled back into my space while the traffic jam, apparently caused by Mean People Man making a left turn off Easton behind the rental, made it impossible for me to go forward in the car. I leapt out of the car and headed on foot toward Mr. Sweets.

Too late. The Mole had already made it to his rental car and driven down Easton toward St. Peter's Hospital. Mahoney couldn't back up and I couldn't go forward. We had been outpaced.

I stood in the street for a while, watching, until Mahoney managed to complete a trip around the block and pull up in the van. He lowered the driver's side window and looked at me.

"I don't really think this plan is going to be all that famous," he said.

"Don't be so sure," I told him. "They're still studying Napoleon at Waterloo."

Chapter Eleven



A *Star-Ledger* assignment had come in on Friday, so I made a couple of phone calls after getting back from the Great Mole Chase Monday morning. Abby was at her office three days before Christmas, since there was no reason for us to care about the holiday. Everyone else was in the house with me, a perfect environment in which to make business phone calls.

After I had made the *Star-Ledger* calls (nobody's *ever* there the first time you call them), I decided to look into a couple of things regarding the Justin Fowler story because freelancers are always on the lookout for ways to prolong the agony.

First, I called Justin's lawyer, who worked for the public defender in Middlesex County, and had a caseload approximating the number of bricks in the Empire State Building. J. Bernard Tyson, who was covering up a first name somehow worse than "Bernard," was, counter to stereotype, not fresh out of law school and idealistic. In fact, he was in his early fifties, and seemed to have eaten a breakfast consisting of sour grapes, rotten eggs, and crow.

"The kid's crazy, and he should plead crazy," he said as soon as he dug Justin's folder out of his files and reminded himself who Justin Fowler was to begin with. "I could knock him down to a charge where he wouldn't even realize he'd done jail time. Kid with a disease like that, the prosecutor doesn't want to put him in front of a jury."

"But what if Justin didn't do it?" I asked after downing a mouthful of Maalox.

A pause. "What do you mean, he didn't do it?" Tyson said. "The kid *said* he did it. He *confessed*, for criminy's sake. Of *course* he did it."

I watched as Ethan and Dylan, sitting side-by-side on the sofa, fought over the remote control to the television. Howard, seated not five feet away in the armchair, read the *New Yorker*, and seemed not to notice. "Where'd

he get the gun?" I asked. "There's no record of him buying and registering a gun, and a weapon like that you don't just pick up at a Wal-Mart."

"There's gun shows all over the place," Tyson said. "The kid is obsessed with guns. He could go to a gun show."

"There are no gun shows in New Jersey—they're illegal," I countered. "Justin doesn't even have a driver's license. How'd he get to a gun show in another state?"

"You never heard of the bus?"

This was New Jersey, and I knew people who didn't go to the bathroom unless they could drive there. But I let that comment go. I hit the "mute" button on the phone, yelled, "PUT DOWN THE REMOTE!" and hit the "mute" button again. "Why'd he do it?" I asked Tyson. "Why did Justin kill Michael Huston, a man he'd never met before in his life, and had no argument with?"

"I just told you, the kid's crazy," he droned. "Had a new gun, and needed to test it out."

"But you know how serious Justin is about guns," I said. "He'd know what kind of damage he could do, and he'd also have a method of testing out the gun without firing it at a living human being. Why not fire it at a firing range? Shoot into a barrel filled with Styrofoam? If he's going to shoot something, why not a squirrel or a rat? Why kill Michael Huston?"

"Crazy's crazy," Tyson said. "I could have a team of psychiatrists on the stand testify, but it won't go to trial. The prosecutor doesn't want to go after a crazy kid."

"He's *NOT CRAZY!*" I screamed into the phone as Howard looked instinctively at Ethan, and Dylan stifled a chuckle. "Justin Fowler has Asperger's Syndrome—if anything, he's autistic. It's *not* a mental illness, just like what you have isn't a mental illness!"

"What I have? What do *I* have?" Tyson asked.

"*Stupidity!*" I said, hanging up loudly.

Two pairs of eyes were staring at me from the living room. Ethan, of course, hadn't noticed, and was busy taking the remote control and changing the channel to *Dexter's Laboratory*.

I said something on the order of "heh, heh, heh," and picked up the phone again. The best defense is complete denial that anything happened.

Working on something that had been itching at me for a few days, I checked with James Earl Jones (he supplies the 411 welcome voice for Verizon) and got the number of the administration offices of the University of Indiana. Worming my way through the layers of bureaucracy, I managed to find the Registrar's office after being kept on hold only twice. After being transferred to my second registrar, I asked about the records of one Kevin Fowler, a junior whose major I did not know. There were the inevitable clicks of a computer keyboard in the background as my current best buddy checked on his computer.

"You're sure about the spelling?" he asked after a moment.

"Yeah, I'm sure," I said, and spelled it again.

"And he's a junior?"

Seeing as how this was the grand total of my information on the subject, I worried that the next question would make me seem foolish. "Yes," I answered. "I'm sure he's a junior."

There was a long pause this time, and more clacking, then silence. Finally, the registrar du jour returned to the phone.

"There's no one by that name enrolled here in any class," he said. "Never has been."

Chapter Twelve



After checking with Indiana State University, University of Southern Indiana, Indiana University of Pennsylvania (huh?), and Purdue University-Indianapolis, I determined that Kevin Fowler, despite his obvious academic gifts, was not enrolled in a college whose name included the state of Indiana. This was not, I should note, a major shock to me, but it did necessitate some further investigation. I called Rodriguez, but he wasn't in.

Desperate to get the heck out of my house and distance myself from my houseguests, I walked to Police Headquarters and asked Marsha if Barry Dutton was in. Being chief of police requires one to be in Police Headquarters more often than most citizens, so I found Chief Dutton behind his desk, which I pointed out to him was not as grand as the one behind which Chief Leslie Baker of the North Brunswick Police Department was currently sitting.

"I know," Barry nodded. "But this is so much more homey."

"I need some police-type thinking," I said.

"Any type of thinking will be an improvement."

"Geez, wake up on the wrong side of the paddywagon this morning, Barry?"

The chief nodded his head slightly and frowned a little. "Westbrook dumped his girlfriend, and he's making my existence a living hell," he said.

I sat still, shocked to my tiny core. "Westbrook dumped his girlfriend? You sure you didn't get that backwards?"

With great glumness, my friend shook his head. "No, he ended the relationship himself. Felt he could do better."

"Maybe we should chip in and buy the man a mirror. What brought this on?"

Barry leaned back in his chair and locked his fingers behind his head. "She got a new job."

"You're speaking in riddles today, oh Police Oracle."

"I wish I were. The woman wanted to be a hairdresser, and a job opened up in a salon on Edison Avenue."

"So?" This was more perplexing than the Huston murder, and had considerably more potential for me to make fun of Westbrook, so I was paying a good deal of attention.

"So, Cyndi wasn't working at the All-You-Can-Eat anymore, and Westbrook figured he didn't need a restyling, but he was missing out on the free eats. So he dumped her." Barry was having trouble hiding the grin now.

"You're lying to me. Here's a guy with the personality of gravel and the looks of a Macy's parade float, and he's dumping an actual live woman . . . She *is* alive, right?"

"Far as I know. I don't think they're hiring dead haircutters on Edison Avenue."

"He's dumping an actual live woman because he no longer saves \$7.95 when he goes to the Trough-eteria. Am I getting this right?"

"You're a born detective, Aaron Tucker," said Barry. "You've analyzed the situation flawlessly."

I sat for a few moments and shook my head, staring at the diploma over Barry's head. I never knew he went to Stanford. Oh yeah, colleges.

"Speaking of being a detective," I began.

"Don't let what I said go to your head," Dutton interrupted. "I was being arch."

"You could be *an* arch, if you could touch your fingers to the ground while you stood up. Nonetheless, I have a police question for you."

"If I can't answer, should I call a cop, or just make something up."

"Make something up. There's never a cop around when you need one."

He grumbled a little, which would unnerve most mortals, but had no effect on me. If Barry ever hurt me, his wife, I'm pretty sure, would yell at him, and he hates that. And my wife wouldn't be too thrilled, either.

"What exactly do you need to know, Citizen Tucker?"

"A guy says he's a student at the University of Indiana. Phone records show he called his mother, who lives in North Brunswick, twice from Indiana the week Michael Huston was shot. But there's one little thing—the University of Indiana has never heard of the guy. And I think he was in the area of New Jersey that week. Now, how is that possible?"

Barry, now the professional, sat back and thought. “He have a cell phone?”

“Yes, but it’s based here in Jersey. No record of a cell phone in Indiana.”

“An address in Indiana?”

“I haven’t been able to find one, but admittedly, I haven’t had time to look very hard.”

Barry sat up. “Ah-hah!” he said. “I have it.”

I cut him off. “He has a phone number set up in Indiana, possibly based in a friend’s house or a local business,” I said. “It doesn’t exist physically, but it bounces whatever calls he gets there to his number here in Jersey. He can also bounce his outgoing calls through that number to make it look like he’s calling from Indiana.”

Barry, looking deflated, stared at me. “How did you guess all that?” he asked.

“I tried doing it myself for a couple of years,” I told him. “Make it look like I was in the L.A. area in case producers wanted to meet. They don’t like to do business with people outside the Hollywood area.”

“Did it help?”

“Am I a successful screenwriter today?”

He stared at a spot above my head, clearly thinking about the murder case again. “Somebody’s going to an awful lot of trouble to make it look like he’s in Indiana,” Barry said. “Why would he do something like that?”

“I’m just guessing,” I said, “but I think it’s because he’s been here the whole time.”

“Who is this guy?” Barry asked.

“Kevin Fowler, the younger brother of the guy they’ve charged with the crime. I met him once, and got a bad vibe.”

“You’re basing this on a bad vibe?” Barry tried not to guffaw. If you’ve never seen a very large African-American man struggle not to guffaw, don’t feel deprived—it really doesn’t live up to the hype.

“No, I’m basing it on my understanding of Asperger’s Syndrome. Justin Fowler says he found the gun—*after* the murder—in a hiding place he and his brother used when they were kids. He’s lying about a few things, not the least of which is his confession that he killed Michael Huston. And the only

person besides his mother for whom Justin would lie about these things has to be his brother, Kevin. It fits.”

Barry frowned. “Let me play devil’s advocate. Justin really did kill Huston, confessed to it, then got scared of spending the rest of his life in jail. So he started lying to protect his ass, and in the process, implicated his brother. It fits that way, too.”

“Explain the fake University of Indiana registration and the phone that rings through from Muncie.”

He pursed his lips, about to reply, then thought better. “Okay, I can’t,” he said. “But you don’t have enough yet. Why would Kevin Fowler want to kill Michael Huston?”

I probably pursed my lips, too. It was a lip-pursing contest, and I knew not how to judge it. “I have no idea,” I admitted. “But I can find out.”

On the way out of the building, I passed by Westbrook, who was back in his double-knit checkerboard suit, making him look like he was about to squirt water out of his carnation or put on big, floppy red shoes and climb out of a small car with thirty or forty of his closest friends. He grimaced at me as I went by, and I couldn’t resist.

“Hey, Gerry,” I said as I passed. “You’re looking a little shaggy. Think you could get yourself a free makeover anywhere in town?”

Luckily, Westbrook can’t run.

Chapter Thirteen



Dinner that night was the usual cornucopia of hilarity, with Howard and Andrea glaring openly at me, Dylan questioning everything Ethan did or said, Leah finally giving up and acting sullen like everyone else, Abby cooking until the last possible second and seemingly never sitting down, and Ethan . . . well, Ethan didn't much notice, as soon as pasta was placed in front of him.

In a day and a half, I assured myself, the house would belong to its usual occupants. Even Warren seemed a little relieved. He occasionally picked his head up off the floor and looked at us, particularly while meat was being served to anyone anywhere near the table.

I was determined to see the better side of Abby's family, but I couldn't figure out how to do that without climbing under the table. Howard would clearly have been happier if his younger sister had married someone more like him, and Andrea didn't actually exist on Planet Earth. She was in a place where talking about something and doing it were roughly the same thing, as if you could get pregnant by saying "let's go to bed." Which, come to think of it, might have been how she got pregnant to begin with.

Dylan, I had decided, was treated as a prince, but actually was the spawn of Satan, so calling him "Prince of Darkness" wasn't necessarily that great a stretch. I realize it's not nice to brand a 15-year-old boy, but then, as Shakespeare once noted, some people are just pains in the ass.

At the moment, he was trying to attack Ethan's eating habits again. This is a particularly sore spot for Ethan, who knows his AS makes him "pickier" than most kids, but for whom venturing outside his accepted range of foods is a downright terrifying idea. He wants to be more like other people, but not if it entails actually changing the way he is. It's a difficult concept, and not made any better by teasing.

"How come you're eating spaghetti when the rest of us are having turkey?" Dylan did his best not to sneer, but failed. "Are you allergic or

something?”

“No,” Ethan answered, his face reddening a bit.

“Well, then why?”

“It’s okay for Ethan to eat what he wants to eat, honey,” Andrea cooed to her son. “You eat what the adults have.”

“I’m having turkey, too,” Leah noted, “and I’m not a grownup.”

Before any more scintillating banter, I decided to jump in and emphasize one of Ethan’s strengths. “So Ethan,” I said, “I found out about Kevin Fowler’s phone calls from Indiana.” I told him that Rodriguez had confirmed, through phone records, Kevin’s sham phone number in Muncie that rang through to his cell phone.

“So that means he didn’t have to be in Indiana when he called, but he could be anywhere, since his cell phone goes wherever he goes,” Ethan said.

“Very good,” I said. “That’s exactly what it means.”

“Big deal,” said Dylan. “I could have figured *that* out.”

I couldn’t help it. “Maybe you could have,” I said quietly. “But Ethan *did*.” Leah, of all people, snickered at that.

Andrea gave me a sharp look, as if to say that I shouldn’t trample on her precious child’s self-esteem, but somebody had to, since the kid had about seven pounds more self-esteem than he actually merited. I did not continue the line of conversation, however.

Ethan did. “Do you think Kevin killed Michael Huston?” he asked, with his mother’s cut-to-the-chase directness.

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. “But I really don’t think Justin did, no matter what he says.”

Leah chirped up at exactly the right time. “Was there any blood on Justin’s clothes?” she asked. “If the guy who shot him was using that old gun you were talking about, he’d have to stand pretty close, right? So there’d be blood on his clothes, right?”

“Oh, really!” said Howard. “Is this the kind of conversation we want to have with our children at dinner?” Personally, I didn’t see why not, especially since I hadn’t considered Leah’s question before. But I didn’t say anything.

“I think Leah made a good point,” said a voice from across the room. Abigail, at the stove seasoning mashed potatoes in a way that would make

them taste like something (a skill I have never developed), chimed in. “That was very good thinking, Leah.”

Leah beamed. Stunned by this strange reversal in his sister’s behavior, Howard stared at Abby. Since he was her brother, he didn’t stare the way most men stare at Abby. He was absolutely shocked.

“I don’t see how this is helping to develop the children’s manners,” he said. Maybe she’d simply misunderstood, or wasn’t picking up the cues properly.

“Maybe not,” said his sister, “but it’s an interesting conversation, and they’re developing their analytical skills.”

It would have been unseemly for me to leap up and cover my wife with kisses, and besides, it would have delayed the mashed potatoes, so I kept my seat. But I’ve rarely been more glad to be married to Abigail Stein. And keep in mind, I’m *never* not glad to be married to Abigail Stein.

Howard, on the other hand, was auditioning for a government grant to raise fumphering to an art form. “I just . . . I don’t . . . This is. . . he said, and never quite got a full sentence out.

Abigail, an unfamiliar twinkle in her eye, stole a glance at me, and it was everything I could do to keep from applauding. “Personally,” said my wife, “I think the gangsters rubbed Michael out because he was behind in his gambling debts.”

“Wow, Mom,” Ethan gasped. “Do you really think so? Mr. Shapiro told Dad he didn’t do it.”

“Yeah,” said Leah, “I’m sure that a guy who kills people and robs them and stuff would *never* lie.”

Ethan, who has had to learn such things from scratch, said to her, “That was sarcasm, wasn’t it?”

“The official family language,” I chimed in.

Howard, eyes doing 360’s in their sockets, was clearly in the throes of a desperately hard choice: endure this unsavory conversational turn and his sister’s astonishing defiance, or miss out on a free meal.

It was a tough choice, but cheapness won. He stayed through dinner, and, the instant he finished eating, fled for the basement and a copy of a Jean-Claude Sartre tract. Andrea followed shortly after, feeling a sudden need to help clean up, something she hadn’t done for the five days they’d been in New Jersey. She and Abby had been lost in a quiet conversation for

some time, and then Andrea also disappeared into the bowels of our home. Dylan, allowed now to get his video game fix, ran upstairs to beat Ethan to the PlayStation, and Ethan, just as happy, resumed his usual television schedule by tuning in *The Fairly Oddparents*, a cartoon show designed specifically to drive anyone over the age of sixteen to suicide.

I told Abby I'd be glad to take Warren for his constitutional tonight, and although she seemed surprised, agreed to skip the walk she usually enjoyed. It was possible the sub-zero wind chill factor played a part in her decision, although it had nothing to do with mine. She agreed to work on a Chanukah gift list, since the Festival of Keeping Up with the Goyim was starting unusually late this year, two days after Christmas, the holiday that unfortunately does not end all holidays.

I put on the Aaron Tucker outerwear collection (which means I collected all the outerwear I could find, regardless of whose clothing it might be), saddled up the dog, who was thrilled to be going out—and would be during an Ice Age—and ventured out into weather that was, apparently, not fit for man but okay for beast.

Naturally, it was dark, but even so, I had become accustomed to looking for, and not seeing, my three felonious angels outside the door. There was no sign of *anyone*, let alone three extremely large gentlemen who—for all I knew—were also packing heat. So I was deliberate and careful in approaching the usual dog route. I let Warren take care of his initial task, which involves the lifting of legs, at the first tree we encountered, and then sauntered casually to the corner.

Once there, in a conversational tone, I said to the dog, "I know I'm not being followed, but if I were, it would be good to see the people following me in a couple of minutes." Warren looked up, blinked, and went back to sniffing the curb for remnants of something I'd rather not think about that might have been there three months earlier. Warren is very thorough, and has a nose that can pick up smells as far away as Moscow.

Sure enough, when we got to the same corner where we first encountered Moe, Larry, and Silent Bob, they were already standing there, in plain sight, although their faces were mostly obscured by hoods, scarves, and various freeze-resisting accessories.

"You gotta figure dogs think we worship them," Big said when we arrived.

“How’s that?” It was nice not to have to deal in the usual niceties of conversation.

“They lie around the house all day, we feed them and give them shelter, and when they take a dump, we pick it up and bring it home in a bag. They’ve got to figure they’re gods.” He had a point, but I’d never let him know it.

“You have a point,” I said.

“You wanted to see us?” Big said. Warren, unlike Karen Huston’s dog, did not warm up to people he didn’t like, no matter how many times he encountered them (probably because he’s not bright enough to remember he’s encountered them before). So he was growling at the three Grand Tetons, and I held his leash tightly.

“I’d prefer not to have you around, but in this case, yes,” I answered.

“Is that nice?” Bigger asked through a muffler. “He says he wants to see us, and then complains when we’re always around. Makes a guy feel unwanted.”

“Sorry,” I told him. “I didn’t realize you were such a sensitive fellow.”

“I’m a regular Dr. Phil,” he answered.

“What can we do for you?” Big asked as Warren gave up the growling and set himself up for the evening’s entertainment.

“I’m glad you asked me that question,” I said.

Chapter Fourteen



It was Christmas Eve, or at least December 24th, and under normal circumstances, it's impossible to get anyone on the phone. I realize Christmas is a big holy day and everything, but I think the British duo "Everything but the Girl" put it best when they said of Yuletide, "It's cold, and there's nothing to do."

Jews, at least those of us who live on the East Coast of the United States, have very specific Christmas traditions, and they vary remarkably little from family to family, town to town, or state to state: we go to the movies, and then out for Chinese food.

That wouldn't happen until tomorrow, however, so I had one more day to decide who had killed Michael Huston, who was sabotaging Mahoney's cars, and finish the revisions on the screenplay for Waterman. In that sentence, "finish" is a relative term because I hadn't actually started the revisions yet. With Christmas Day falling on a Wednesday, I figured Glenn would give me until Thursday, at least.

If I had everything done by Thursday afternoon, perhaps I could squeeze in a little Chanukah shopping.

Abby was going in to her office, although the day was essentially useless, an excuse to hold a party where everybody got loaded and an unusual number of the men made a quick pass at my wife. The passes were quick because my wife is an expert at deflecting them, and then not telling me, because I'd just get upset. Women like to keep you from things that will get you upset, unless they're the ones upsetting you.

I started the day early, since I knew that by afternoon, no one would be available, and I needed some people to be available. First thing Tuesday morning, as soon as I thought it was safe, I called Mary Fowler.

She was surprised to hear from me, but wasn't, thank goodness, asleep when I called. I asked if she expected Kevin home for Christmas Eve, and she didn't answer right away.

“Normally I would,” she said, “but I haven’t heard from him. I don’t even know if he’s still in Indiana.”

That was the wedge I needed to ask the question I wanted to ask without needlessly upsetting Mary. And there are people who think I’m not sensitive to others’ feelings. The swine.

“Well, if Kevin were in town, but not at home, where would he be?” I asked.

“Probably at his friend Bill Mahovic’s house,” she said without much thought. “Those two have been inseparable since grade school.” Mary sounded surprised when I asked for Bill’s address, but she looked it up and gave it to me.

“I might be over later with Ethan,” I told her. “How late is too late?”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Mary said. “We’ll be here all day. It’s Christmas Eve, you know.”

“I heard,” I told her. “Thanks, Mary. I’ll probably see you later.”

Ethan was sleeping in, as was his right during a school vacation, so I left him alone and decided to put the Very Famous Plan, the Sequel, into action. I called Mahoney on his cell phone and asked where he was at that moment.

“Still at the house,” he said. “It’s seven-thirty. I’m just about to hit the door.”

“For where?”

“Iselin. Near Metropark.” And he gave me the address. “I won’t be there for another twenty minutes or so, though. I have to stop on the way.”

“What for?” I asked.

“Wrapping paper,” he said, as if it were obvious. “It’s Christmas Eve, you know.”

“Yeah,” I said. “It was in all the papers.”

“You non-Christian types have it pretty easy, don’t you?”

“Sure,” I told him. “Try buying eight nights’ worth of presents on a freelancer’s salary.”

“No trees, though.”

“I’ll meet you there in half an hour,” I said and hung up.

I called two more of Karen and Michael’s friends and got the same glowing reports about their marriage—he took her out to dinner twice a week, bought her gifts for no particular reason, and actually enjoyed

shopping with her—to the point where, by comparison, I considered myself as attentive a husband as Ike Turner.

My working methods might seem random and disorganized, but they really are. With any amount of time on our hands, freelancers will always find something to do. It usually doesn't translate into an actual paycheck, but you never know. So the phone calls didn't hurt, and when they were done, it was time to drive up to the Metropark train station in Iselin and meet Mahoney.

You probably don't care what music I was listening to on the way up Route 27, but since the minivan's radio works as well as anything else in that accursed vehicle, I can tell you it was hard to hear. Another day, I told myself, and I could have my own car back again.

Howard and Andrea had planned their trip to end on Christmas Day, the theory being that there would be less traffic leading up to and at the airport on the holiday. I believed it was more likely that it was cheaper to fly on Christmas, but I can't actually substantiate that belief.

It was comforting to think of the Stein family (West) going back to its ancestral home while I made the trip to Iselin, which only took about fifteen minutes, because the heater in the van hadn't improved any since the other day. But it did continue to bother me that I hadn't been able to break through with Howard or Andrea. Dylan, I figured, was a lost cause.

On Thornall Road, leading up to Metropark, Mahoney was parked in front of a brand new Honda SUV, black and imposing, with frosted windows. The hood was open, and Mahoney's head wasn't visible as I pulled into the parking lot near the office building served by the road.

I called his cell phone number. "You all set up?" I asked.

"Yeah, but I couldn't even get the wrapping paper. Can you believe no card stores were open at seven-thirty in the morning?"

"Amazing. The car, Mahoney, the car."

"We are free and clear to navigate. It's a busted hose, I'm saying."

"How far from being finished?"

"Whenever you say," Mahoney answered.

"How will he get under the hood?" I asked.

Mahoney closed the hood and made sure it was locked. "He's going to have to go through the interior."

"Perfect."

We closed up our cell phones and Mahoney got into his van and drove away, at least as far as the eye could see. I sat in my minivan, engine off, freezing my gazangas off and cursing the day Mahoney had decided not to get a job in a nice, warm office. He speaks three languages (which puts him two and a half up on me), and can converse intelligently on everything from the code of the Samurai to the batting averages of the 1969 Miracle Mets. He chooses to be a rental car mechanic because he considers it a challenge. Life is often cruel, but very rarely logical.

It could also be remarkably dull, like when one sits in a frigid minivan waiting for a sneaky rental car company employee to show up. I filled the time trying to figure out where I'd gone wrong with the Justin Fowler story.

I knew it should have been simple, so I figured I'd either been distracted by all the brouhaha in my household, or I'd been lazy, either of which is inexcusable in business, but happens all the time. I had a young man with Asperger's Syndrome who had confessed to a killing and had the murder weapon in his possession. I had his younger brother, who was perpetuating the myth he was going to college in Indiana when he was, in fact, probably in New Jersey the whole time, and might very well have planted the murder weapon in a place where his older sibling found it.

There was also the clearly grieving widow, who for whatever reasons, believed her husband was indebted to gangsters, despite a lack of any evidence to support that position. She had a strange relationship with her attorney, and a dog who only liked me after we'd met a number of times.

And then, there was Mr. Shapiro. If he could be believed (and there was no reason to think he could, aside from his taste in ethnic baked goods), and he truly had no connection to Michael Huston's murder, Hyman Shapiro's interest in the case, and particularly in my welfare since we'd met, was especially baffling. He had three gargantuan henchmen providing me overtime protection from something so dangerous he couldn't even tell me, the intended victim, what it was. And he was willing to keep them (said henchmen) working on the Tucker patrol until such time as Shapiro himself deemed the threat extinguished.

It was a knot of electronics cords, all bunched together. You know each one leads to something, and they might even work as one if you could ever identify and free each, but it was almost impossible to untangle each one in order to find its end on either side.

I was awakened from this metaphorical reverie by the approach of another rental car. Mahoney had told me the proper stickers to look for on the trunk, but any plain vanilla car that looks like it's brand new is a decent candidate, and here it came—another in a series of Chevy Cavaliers. One thing you could say for the Mole—he was consistent and cheap. Okay, two things.

I started the minivan after he passed, when I was sure only one person was in the Cavalier. By now, I had come to recognize the Mole, although Mahoney, who had seen him only for a relatively long moment and knew some of the rental company's employees, had not recognized him from work. He was, as everything in my life seemed to be lately, a mystery.

The Mole stopped his car in front of the SUV, very obviously looked around the area for any sign of Mahoney's van (since he probably hadn't noticed me at all during the Easton Avenue fiasco), and then got out and walked to the black SUV. Again, he looked from side to side before reaching into his pocket for whatever implement he was using to open the locks. I was surprised he wasn't high-tech enough to have a wireless car opener that could be adjusted to whatever frequency would be necessary to open the door, but apparently the Mole was quite the craftsman, and he opened the driver's side door quickly. He clearly was hoping to open the door, nonchalantly reach in, pop the hood, and then get his sabotaging in before anyone could see.

What he wasn't counting on was the strong pair of arms that reached out and pulled him into the SUV. The door closed behind him, courtesy of an even stronger pair of arms. The SUV was absolutely still, and with the frosted windows, no one would ever have known anything out of the ordinary was going on inside it.

I decided to drive down to the SUV, rather than walk, since walking would have to take place outside, and the minivan's heater, however insufficient, was better than no heater at all. Besides, I'm from New Jersey, and the god-given right to drive to anywhere, no matter how minuscule the distance, is strong with my people.

As I was traversing the enormous 100-yard distance to the SUV, I dialed Mahoney on the cell phone.

"Got him," I said, and hung up.

It took about six seconds for the Trouble Mobile to appear from behind the office building with Mahoney behind the wheel. By the time I parked the minivan behind the SUV, Mahoney had maneuvered his van in front of the big black vehicle. There would be no escape this time.

“What took you so long?” I asked when we were both out of our respective vehicles.

“Traffic,” he said.

We walked to the SUV as Mahoney cracked his knuckles inside his green knit gloves (company issue). His face took on an expression I’m hoping never to see aimed in my general direction.

He opened the driver’s side door as I got in through the rear door on the passenger’s side. In the car, Bigger was holding The Mole still in the front seat, while Biggest, behind the wheel, merely looked at him threateningly, and moved over when Mahoney got in. Big, next to me in the back seat, grinned with a malicious enjoyment of another person’s discomfort.

“Thanks for the help, guys,” I said to the Terrible Trio.

“No problem,” said Big. “But you understand, our employer is not to be mentioned in these proceedings. We’re doing this strictly as a (and here he grinned) *freelance* assignment.”

“That’s very amusing,” I told him.

The Mole, a blond, thin man in his late thirties, was wide-eyed and speechless, despite the lack of a gag, or for that matter, any vocal restraints at all. The three huge men in parkas and the one huge man in the rental car overalls, whose face was screaming rage and violence, were enough to keep him from trying to bolt.

Mahoney ignored the banter between Big and myself, and merely glared at The Mole, which probably worried him more than the sudden change in his situation or the burly reception committee he’d discovered in what I’m sure he thought would be an empty, easy mark.

“I’m going to say this once, and only once,” Mahoney said quietly to The Mole. “If you answer my questions straight, nothing bad will happen to you. If you don’t, I can’t say the same thing. Is that clear?”

The Mole’s eyes, already the size of silver dollars, widened a bit more, and despite the temperature, sweat beads began to form on his forehead. He indicated he understood.

Mahoney nodded. "Good. Now, first. I don't recognize you. What part of the company do you work for?"

"Company? What company?" The Mole said. It was the kind of answer that could get a witness badly hurt in a crime movie, but was delivered with such obvious panic and confusion that it was hard to believe The Mole was trying to lie his way out of trouble.

"The rental car company," Mahoney said with an icy calm. I was seeing a side of my friend that I'd never seen before, and wouldn't mind not seeing again. To Mahoney, this man had threatened his code, his very belief in himself. And that wasn't something you did lightly in Mahoney's universe.

"I don't work for a rental car company," The Mole said with a slight rise in pitch. Without so much as a finger on him, he looked like he was being physically tortured. I worried for the SUV's leather seats. "I was hired as an independent."

Mahoney's brow knitted. "Then why were you always in a rental car?"

"I'm from out of state. I needed a car. I figured I might as well rent from your company."

This wasn't going the way Mahoney had expected, but The Mole wasn't exactly dealing from a position of strength, either. "If you weren't getting my assignments from the office, how did you get them?"

"The same way you did, through the cell phone," said The Mole. He started to reach for his pocket, and Bigger grabbed his hand. "I just want to show him the receiver," The Mole said to Bigger.

"I'll get it," Bigger said, and he reached into The Mole's jacket pocket, and came out with a small black box that looked like a television's remote control unit.

"It searches cell phone frequencies until you find the one you want," The Mole said. "It's not as easy as it used to be, but you can usually find the wireless connection you're looking for."

"So you're not from my company?" Mahoney was unusually slow in picking up the information, since he had so expected different answers, but believed the ones he was getting.

"No," said The Mole. "I just do what I'm told."

"Why? Why does somebody want my jobs sabotaged? What do you gain by making me look bad?" Mahoney leaned over, and The Mole, with

no room in a vehicle populated by four very large men, Mahoney included, tried to lean back, and failed.

“I’m just doing it because I’ve been paid to do it. Honest. You’ve got to believe me!” I thought The Mole might actually begin to cry.

“All right then,” Mahoney said, towering over The Mole as much as he could inside a closed vehicle. “This is going to be the last question, and you’d better answer it correctly.”

The Mole, a whimper short of a full panic, nodded.

“Who’s paying you to do this to me?”

The Mole told him, and as soon as we heard the name, both my mouth and Mahoney’s dropped open about three feet.

Chapter Fifteen



The house, a large brown Victorian, was one of the largest in town, although it wasn't at all ostentatious. The owners had needed the space because they had seven children.

I remembered when a swing and several bicycles were on the wrap-around porch, but now it was bare, perhaps due to the weather.

Screened-in during the summer months, the porch lacked insulation or windows, so this cold winter day, it was no place for civilized conversation, or even uncivilized conversation.

Having dropped The Mole off at Newark Liberty International Airport (a post-9/11 compromise name so stupid there's no point in even recounting the tale) with specific instructions to get himself good and lost, Mahoney and I stood waiting at the front door, his Trouble Mobile parked at the curb. Big, Bigger, and Biggest were probably in the neighborhood, but the black SUV was no longer visible, and neither were they.

Mahoney's breath, visible in the cold, was a little heavier than usual, resembling the steam that comes from a horse's nostrils on chilly days. After a silent drive of a little less than an hour, I wasn't sure how he was reacting to The Mole's revelations. I didn't think he was contemplating violence, but silence often doesn't tell you all that much about a person's intentions.

There wasn't much in the way of Christmas decoration on the house, but the string of lights that ringed the windows was, at least, colorful. Jews like me (that is to say, the kind that consider themselves Jewish, minus the messy "religion" part) like to drive around and look at the Christmas lights every year, mostly because we never have the nerve to call attention to our houses by making them look like Disney World rides. The only reference to Jews decorating their houses for a holiday had to do with lamb's blood, and is best left unemulated in Central New Jersey. Still, I do prefer the colored

lights to the current trend toward white-only, which seems not only unimaginative but somehow segregationist.

The pause since Mahoney had pushed the doorbell hadn't been long, but he was already shifting his weight from leg to leg, as if he expected to jump one way or the other, but didn't know which. After what seemed an eternity, but was really about fifteen seconds, the front door opened.

Behind it was a tall, thin, bald man in his mid-seventies, wearing wire rimmed glasses and corduroy everything, including a vest. I was glad I'd left Ethan home—the sound of all that corduroy rubbing together would have left him quivering on the ground. Sometimes, Asperger's kids are unusually sensitive to sound.

The man looked surprised when he saw who was at his door, but he smiled. "Jeffrey," he said to Mahoney. "We weren't expecting you until tomorrow."

"Dad," Mahoney said. "May we come in?"

"Of course, of course," he said, stepping aside to let us out of the refrigerator and into the house. "You must be freezing." I think he was referring to Mahoney's rather distant behavior, but we were damn cold, so I was glad to walk inside.

It had been a good number of years since I'd set foot inside Mahoney's boyhood home in Bloomfield. It was a lot different now, with the seven kids (Mahoney being the eldest) all grown and gone. Mahoney had tried to get his parents to sell the place and move into something more manageable, but they weren't ready for an "active adult community," and liked the familiarity of the house. Truth be known, they were probably happy to have all that space to themselves after the years of raising such a loud, boisterous brood.

Things certainly were neater now. There were no jigsaw puzzles partially completed on the dining room table, no rollerblades on the floor by the door, no piles of laundry in various stages of completion, no constant flow of humanity through the kitchen, and, alas, no bearded collie named Marvin, the biggest, friendliest, stupidest dog ever.

These days, it looked more like the kind of house two senior citizens lived in, without the burden of a mortgage. It was, indeed, a testament to retirement—Mahoney's father from the Newark police force, and his mother from teaching art to grammar school children in Irvington. Now, an

easel was prominently displayed in the living room, where one might expect a television. A model train set was cleverly constructed to follow the thick wooden molding over the dining room doors, and piles of fishing, boating, and art magazines were near the easy chairs, of which there were a goodly number.

“Aaron Tucker,” Mahoney’s father said, looking me over fondly. “Haven’t seen you in years.”

“I hope I don’t look all that different, Sergeant Mahoney,” I said. “It’s good to see you.”

“You’re still a kid,” he said with a warm grin. “And drop that ‘sergeant’ stuff. I’m retired, and you’re old enough to call me Al.”

“I don’t think I can do that,” I said honestly.

He was about to respond when his son, whose glances around the room added to the tension of the situation, said, “Where’s Mom?”

“She’s inside,” the elder Mahoney said, pointing through the dining room to where the family room once was, a place where the television did in fact exist, and where ex-Sergeant Mahoney had once devoted himself to his laserdisc collection. Outdated forms of technology, apparently, run in the family.

“I need to talk to her,” Mahoney said, walking briskly through the dining room.

“I think I’d better go with him, uh . . .

“Al,” said Mahoney’s dad, who seemed to know he wasn’t supposed to follow us.

I almost had to run to keep up with Mahoney, but when we made it into the family room, he stopped dead in his tracks, and I very nearly bumped into him like a character in a Warner Brothers cartoon. With the camera in front of Mahoney, you wouldn’t see me. You’d just hear the Carl Stalling music and see Mahoney slightly flinch when I inadvertently smacked into his back.

And there are those who say my generation didn’t grow up with an appreciation of fine art.

I peered around his side to see his mother, a tall, hearty, dark-skinned woman with brown hair of a shade different than the one I remembered, in a pair of blue jeans and a green sweatshirt over a longsleeved flannel shirt. She looked up from her work in the heavily decorated room. Her work

appeared to be wrapping a gift, and she immediately looked startled and a little irritated.

“Oh, Jeffrey,” she said to Mahoney. “You’ve spoiled the surprise.”

I moved out from behind him and she noticed me. “Aaron!” she said, opening her arms. “It’s so good to see you!”

“Hi, Mrs. . . . She held up a finger to remind me of our decades-old agreement. “Sorry. *Mom*.” I wondered how my mother would feel about my calling someone else by that name, but this didn’t seem the time.

Isobel Mahoney, born in Venezuela, walked over and gave me a warm matronly hug. Her son, stupefied, gave me a look that was neither warm nor matronly. He, for one, remembered why we were here.

“Mom,” he said a little more forcefully, and she let go of me and faced her son, who was only a few inches taller than she. Isobel slightly shook her head.

“Oh, fine,” she said. “If you can’t wait.”

She walked back to the table where she’d been working and picked up a box partially obscured by green foil wrapping paper with gold bells printed in vertical rows. She held it out to Mahoney.

“Here. Merry Christmas.”

Possibly without even knowing he was doing so, Mahoney held out his hand and took the box from his mother. He looked at it.

A boxed set of DVDs: the entire *Planet of the Apes* movie series. Mahoney, she knew, was a huge *Apes* fan—in every possible sense of the word “huge.”

“Mom,” he said for the third time, holding out his hands to gesture, but looking merely confused.

“Is that all you have to say?” Isobel frowned at her son. “Why did I bother?”

“Mom, I came here today because of the man you sent to sabotage my work.”

Isobel went back to the table and picked up another gift, taking the wrapping paper from Mahoney and using it on the new box. Waste not, want not, I guess.

“Oh, *that*,” she said.

Oh, that?

Mahoney didn't so much sit as melt into a low sofa, which at one time hadn't been so low. His knees seemed to give up their mission and surrender to the enemy—gravity—and he sank into the sofa in a gesture of futility I hadn't seen from him since he was eighteen years old.

"I don't understand. You *admit* you sent someone to mess up all the work I was doing?"

She had folded and taped the wrapping paper expertly, and was wielding ribbon like most people use a fork on spaghetti. "Of course, I admit it," Isobel answered. Even under stress, her voice never held the slightest trace of an accent. "I did it for you."

That was enough for me. Now *I* sank into the couch, too, although it wasn't quite as long a trip, since my knees started out closer to the ground. I sat next to Isobel.

"Aaron," she said, "since you're so close, would you mind lending me a finger?" She indicated a spot to hold the ribbon while she created an elaborate knot of some kind, and even without thinking, I obeyed her request. "Thanks, dear."

Mahoney seemed to be shrinking as I looked at him, and under any other circumstances, I probably would have found it amusing, or at least let him *think* I found it amusing. I decided against speaking at all.

He finally managed words. "You did it . . . for me?"

"Certainly," Isobel nodded as she tied off the knot and gave me a signal to let go. "You know how I feel about you running all over the state, getting yourself into all sorts of situations in all sorts of weather. It's dangerous. We've talked about it enough times before, haven't we?"

"Well, yeah, but—"

"No 'but' about it," Isobel continued, on a roll now. "I've told you time and again. I get out of bed worrying about you in the morning, and go to sleep worrying about you at night. But would you listen to reason? Noooooooo, not you! 'It's what I'm best at, Mom; I've got to do what I want, Mom.' Huh!"

She turned to me without missing a beat. "I made Christmas cookies, Aaron. Would you like one?"

I figured she wasn't mad at me, so I said "sure." She reached behind her and found a plate of cookies wrapped in cellophane and ribbon.

She pulled the ribbon off.

“I don’t want to be any—” I said.

“Nonsense. You go ahead,” she said, cutting me off. Mahoney looked like his head might leave his neck entirely and go flying around the room.

“So let me get this straight. I wouldn’t quit my job, so you decided to have someone drive around after me and make it look like I couldn’t fix cars anymore?”

Isobel nodded. “That’s right. If you weren’t going to be reasonable, I figured it was necessary to convince your employers you were slowing down. After all, Jeffrey, you’re in your mid-forties now! That’s no age to be driving all over the place with grease on your hands. It makes much more sense for you to be working behind a desk, supervising, using your brain.” I didn’t agree with her, but the chocolate chip cookies were really good. Isobel couldn’t just stop there, though. “Like Aaron does,” she added.

I almost choked on the cookie, but managed, through the power of sheer repetition, to keep eating. It helps to stay practiced. Mahoney’s eyes were so narrow now he looked like Clint Eastwood staring into the sun.

“Mom,” he said, barely keeping himself under control, “I understand you’re worried, but trying to get me fired isn’t going to solve the situation. You have to understand. Twenty-five years ago, I stopped living under your roof. I’m a grown man now.”

“Then where are my grandchildren?” Ah hah! I sat back, crossed one leg over the other, and chewed my cookie, confident in the knowledge that I had twice reproduced. Well, not all by myself, but you get the idea.

I knew for a fact that Mahoney and his wife Susan had made a very early decision not to have children, partly because Mahoney, as the eldest of seven, felt as if he’d helped raise six kids already, and wasn’t especially fond of the experience. He and Susan enjoyed their life together and didn’t want to change it. They were exactly the kind of people who *shouldn’t* have children, and were quite content knowing that.

But Mahoney couldn’t tell his mother he didn’t want her to have any more grandchildren (the other six Mahoney children had provided her with nine so far) because of the chaotic way he had been raised. Isobel was not one for recriminations, particularly when aimed at her.

“Susan can’t have children,” he said quietly. As he spoke the words, I could hear the clever rationalization rolling around in his head: “Susan can’t

have children because we've decided we'd be bad parents—I didn't say she *physically* couldn't have children."

But his mother was tougher than that. "You can adopt," she said.

"We don't want to. Besides, this really isn't about whether or not we have kids, is it, Mom?" Mahoney, awakened by the competition, was leaning forward now, rising to the occasion. I did what I do best, and took another cookie.

Isobel, halfway through another package (the woman had nine grandchildren and seven kids, after all), stopped and exhaled. "No," she said. "It's not. You're right. I just hate the idea of you out on the Turnpike in a snowstorm in the dark. Is that so awful?"

Mahoney stood up and walked to his mother. He gestured for her to stand, and she did. And my friend embraced his mother and held her close.

"No, it's not so awful," he said. "But it's not fair for you to make my decisions for me. Suppose I decided you should move out of this house and get yourself a one-floor condo that would be easier to take care of?"

"You *have* decided that," Isobel pointed out.

She had walked right into his trap. "Yeah," he said, "but I didn't hire an arsonist to come burn the house down so you'd have to move."

Isobel Mahoney's face lengthened as the words hit home. She held her son, and nodded. "You're right," she said. "I'm sorry, Jeffrey."

"There's one thing I don't understand," I said through a particularly good frosted cookie. "How did you know who to hire to sabotage his cars? I mean, you're not especially well versed in the hiring practices of automotive hit men, are you?"

Mahoney let his mother go, and sat next to her on the other side of the sofa while she went back to her wrapping. "No, I've never had to do anything like that before," she admitted. "I called on an old friend who has some expertise in that."

"Dad knew some criminals who could find a guy?" Mahoney guessed.

"Oh, no," Isobel said, scandalized he'd even suggest such a thing. "Your father doesn't know anything about this. No, I called Hyman Shapiro. He knew who to get."

I figured the chewing had affected my hearing. "You called *who*?" It should have been "whom," I'll grant you, but I was a little taken aback.

“Hyman Shapiro,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone. “Didn’t you know, Jeffrey? We used to date when I was in high school.”

Chapter Sixteen



“There has to be a connection,” I said to Mahoney in the Trouble Mobile. “Mr. Shapiro doesn’t just pop up in conversation twice in the same week. In fact, before last Thursday, I would have bet you there *was* no Mr. Shapiro.”

Mahoney, however, was not on the same continent as the rest of us Americans at the moment. “My own mother,” he was lamenting. “My own mother sets me up to get fired because she’s afraid I’ll catch a cold on the highway. Do you realize what this means? What kind of gene pool I’m coming from? It’s entirely possible I’ll be completely nuts by the time I’m fifty.”

“What makes you think you’re not nuts now? You own a boxed set of the *Planet of the Apes* movies.”

He smiled. “Yeah. She *is* sweet that way.”

This wasn’t getting me anywhere, but the van was, and that’s what counted. The day wasn’t getting any younger, and I still had a major mystery to solve if I was to meet my deadline.

I have never missed a deadline in fifteen years of freelance work, and I don’t intend to start—ever. The name of this game is “keep the customer satisfied,” to quote Simon and Garfunkel, and you don’t get a lot of second chances with editors. *Snapdragon* was my best-paying client (although not my most frequent), and this was only the second time I’d worked with them. There was no point in annoying an editor if I could help it.

Besides, if I could make Mary Fowler happier for Christmas, well, maybe I’d not appear to be Alistair Sim, after all.

“Would you focus on something for a minute?” I asked Mahoney. “I’m running out of time here, and I can’t throw you a softball while you’re driving.”

“I’m dealing with a mother who used to date a Mafia guy, and then calls him after fifty years to hire a saboteur who comes and messes up my work. And you want me to be *focused*?”

I sat back and closed my eyes. “Just for a minute,” I said. “It’s the Mafia guy I’m trying to figure out. Do you think he’s protecting me because of your mom?”

“Yeah, I’m sure while they were catching up and she was asking him to suggest a freelance criminal, your name came up,” Mahoney said. He had a point.

“That’s true. How would he know I’m your mom’s favorite adopted son? So Shapiro must be operating independently of that conversation, and it’s just a total coincidence. Right?”

“No, that’s stupid,” said Mahoney, and again he had a point. Four more points, and he would be a Star of David. “It’d be like me mentioning Burt Lancaster during this conversation, and when you get home, they ask you to write the remake of *Elmer Gantry*.”

“I wouldn’t mind that, except I’ve never seen *Elmer Gantry*.”

“I imagine for the fee, you’d be willing to rent the video.” He had a p —. Oh, never mind.

“So what’s your theory?” I figured there was no sense in killing the speculation just because I couldn’t think of anything that made sense.

“I think once you began making noises in the Michael Huston thing, Shapiro caught wind of it and sent the Goon Squad after you. They followed you, and saw you following me. They reported to him, and he realized there was a connection. But he doesn’t know what it is, so he keeps them following you.”

It made sense, but that didn’t make it true. “Then what’s all this stuff about me being in danger? And how come the Big Three didn’t react when The Mole told us your mom had ordered the hit on your cars? They didn’t seem to know.”

Mahoney considered that. “Maybe Shapiro didn’t tell them. They don’t strike me as being that high on the food chain.”

Since Mahoney was certainly outdoing me in this conversation, I clammed up for the rest of the ride, thinking. It took about forty-five minutes to get back down to East Brunswick.

Bill Mahovic lived in a garden apartment complex not far off Route 18 in East Brunswick, a town that would prefer not to notice it has any garden apartment complexes. East Brunswick likes to concentrate on its extremely high standardized test scores and high rankings in the state’s school

systems, and sincerely believes it is made up entirely of upper middle class single family homes. Stop an East Brunswickian at the strip mall, ask what the average price of a home there is, and see if you get a figure under \$600,000. It would be inaccurate, but that's what they think.

Mahovic did not live in a \$600,000 house. He lived in a one-bedroom apartment with a galley kitchen, a living "area," and a bedroom with a double-sliding-door closet. The walls had been painted white with cheap paint so many times they no longer seemed to be any color at all—they were just walls. Something had to hold the ceiling up.

Mahoney and I stood in the living room, and Mahovic, with a puzzled expression on his face, faced us. He'd let us in, I think, more to stop the below-zero breeze getting into his apartment and less to answer questions about his friend Kevin Fowler.

"Kevin's not here," he said before we had a chance to ask. "If that's what you're here for."

Mahovic, a skinny, tall, completely unformidable "man" of twenty or twenty-one, looked like a basketball player's valet chair. An oversized New York Knicks jersey with "Sprewell" on the back hung off his torso as if held up by a stick. He wore grey sweatpants that also seemed too large, and brought to mind a much less flashy M.C. Hammer.

In other words, Mahovic looked like he would snap like a twig if you hollered too loudly at him in a small room. And coming from a guy my height and strength, that's saying a lot.

"Well, we are looking for him," I answered. "Do you have any idea where Kevin might be?" I would have bet my mortgage payment Kevin was, in fact, in the apartment, if only because Mahovic was so spectacularly unconvincing in his delivery. I've seen Yogi Berra recite dialogue more naturally.

"I dunno," Mahovic said, perhaps exhausting his ability to ad lib. "Probably in college, right?"

"That doesn't seem likely," Mahoney said. He had been standing near me in case there was trouble, but once we had a good look at Mahovic, there seemed to be little chance of that, so Mahoney was now wandering around the room looking for hiding places. Mahovic probably thought he was searching for the stash of pot that was unquestionably also in the

apartment. I'm not one hundred percent sure he realized we were not representatives of the police department.

"Huh? Why not?" Mahovic asked. He didn't like the idea that we weren't just going to buy whatever he said and go away. It was only eleven in the morning, and he'd just gotten out of bed, he told us.

"What do you do for a living?" I asked, cutting off that topic of conversation for the time being.

"Um, I work at the Krauszer's on Route 27 in Somerset," he said. "Mostly nights."

"Is that where you met Kevin?" I knew it wasn't, but I wanted to keep Mahovic talking and see where he'd slip up. It wasn't so much a question of *if* as *when*.

"No, I've known Kev since grade school. Sixth grade. We used to hang at lunch together and dis the nerds." Mahovic was more comfortable recalling the years when he had reached his current level of intelligence and maturity.

Mahoney was behind Mahovic (the opposite of where he'd be in the phone book) when I asked, "So, since he's such a close friend, I guess you know he's not really enrolled at the University of Indiana, right?"

Mahovic's mouth opened and closed a couple of times, but no sound came out. This was his version of smooth covering for a friend. Made you wonder how many of his friends had survived.

"What do . . . what do you mean?" he asked when language once again became a possibility for him.

"I mean that Kevin Fowler hasn't ever been a student at the University of Indiana, that he has a phone line set up to forward his calls from here to there and back, and that he's probably in this apartment hiding as we speak because he was involved in Michael Huston's murder."

Mahovic had no pre-planned response for that, and, requiring further instructions, naturally turned to the source of his information. He instinctively went to ask Kevin, and that meant turning toward the bedroom. But before he could get there or stop himself, he ran into a brick wall named Mahoney.

"Bedroom," I said, and Mahoney and I headed down the hall, Mahovic behind us, complaining about our sudden desire to see where he slept. He said something about his rights, but we didn't especially care, not being

duly licensed investigators or representatives of any government agency. We simply kept walking, and let him follow us.

The bedroom was just as bland and strewn with clothing and half-eaten pizza as the living room, but it was smaller, which gave it more a cozy bear-cave feel. You had to figure that whatever attempts Mahovic made to get women to come see the place were largely unsuccessful, since the screaming and peals of laughter that surely had resulted any time a female set foot in the room would unquestionably have inspired police reports.

“Closet?” Mahoney asked as we walked in and found the room unoccupied. There was a sliding-door closet large enough for a person to hide in, but I shook my head.

“Think of who we’re dealing with,” I said, and he nodded. We both dropped to the floor.

“Hey!” said Mahovic. “What are you guys doing? There’s nobody here.”

Kevin Fowler, hiding under the bed in the center of the room, had his face turned in my direction, and it was not a happy face.

“Why don’t you come up now, Kev?” I asked. “I’m sure the dust coyotes under there could use the space.”

It took a bit of coercion (and a look at Mahoney) to get Kevin out from under the bed, and once he was, to get him to leave the apartment. But I didn’t want to question him here, where he could clam up or issue bald-faced lies. I wanted to appeal to a higher authority, and have him tell his story with his mother in the room.

He didn’t want to leave, but Mahoney—and to a much less effective extent, I—insisted, so Kevin grabbed his biker jacket and headed for the door. I noticed a small bandage on his left hand.

“No gloves, Kev?” I asked. “It’s in the single digits out there.”

“Gloves are for pussies,” he said.

“Funny,” Mahoney pondered. “The only pussy I’ve ever seen wearing gloves is Sylvester the Cat.”

Gloveless, Kevin came with us, and was just as surprised as Mahoney and I were to find the Terrible Trio outside the apartment door, leaning on their black SUV.

“What’s up, fellas?” I asked. “The big and tall men’s shop close early for Christmas?”

Big wasn't smiling. "What are you doing with him?" He indicated Kevin.

I raised an eyebrow, which was almost instinctive. "You guys know each other?" Big didn't answer, and neither did Bigger. I turned to Biggest. "Surely you're not going to clam up on me, too," I said to him with a quiver in my voice. "Not you!"

Big merely glared—not at me, but at Kevin. There was definitely some animosity between the two, because Kevin was trying as hard as he could not to look at Big while Big was giving him the kind of look Superman gave Lex Luthor. (Just as an aside, you see so few children named "Lex" these days, you have to wonder if Luthor didn't spoil things for all of us.)

"What do you need him for?" Big asked me again.

"I'm taking him home to his mom for Christmas," I told him. "He's necessary."

"No, he's not," Bigger said. "Leave him with us."

Kevin's eyes widened. "No," he said. "Don't."

"I really can't," I told Bigger. "I need him for the rest of the afternoon."

"Bad idea," said Big.

"Can't be helped," I told him. "Unless you want to explain to me how you know him."

Big smiled a little. "Wouldn't be my first choice," he said.

"Then he's coming with us."

Big considered, but nodded. "Okay. But we'll be very close by. Understand?" That last part wasn't aimed at me. Kevin nodded, obediently.

"Let's go," I told Mahoney. "This is suddenly getting interesting."

Chapter Seventeen



Mahoney argued the whole way back to my minivan, but when we arrived, he agreed he wasn't needed any further, and could go off to prepare for Christmas with his wife and insane family. He'd have to figure out how to deal with his mother on his own time.

Big insisted on riding in the car with Kevin and me, especially after he heard I was picking up Ethan before heading on to Mary Fowler's house. I felt that Ethan would provide a distraction for Justin, and to be honest, I thought my son might pick up on things I missed.

I wasn't sure, though, whether Big was concerned about our safety, or that Kevin might say something I wasn't supposed to hear.

Mahoney went off to find wrapping paper, and I drove home to get Ethan. He was waiting, already bundled up, in the living room bow window, expertly repaired a month ago by Preston Burke, and fully prepared to get into the car as quickly as possible. I could see Dylan behind him, saying something he thought no one but Ethan could hear, and then saw Abby come up behind him, clearly scolding Dylan for whatever that was. Abby, true to form, had started playing for the home team again.

Ethan got into the passenger seat when he saw Big and Kevin in the back. Big, keeping an eye on Kevin, wasn't saying much, and Kevin wasn't saying anything at all.

All of them were surprised when I started driving to Karen Huston's house.

I wasn't all that intent on changing the plans, but now that I was starting to have suspicions about him, any way to keep Kevin Fowler off balance would help. And the look on his face when we drove up Karen's driveway would be a very important clue. If he had known Michael Huston, he might know his house. His facial expression would tell me that.

The problem was, I couldn't see it. He was behind me on the driver's side (Big wanted to keep him out of Ethan's way entirely), and the mirror

was at an angle that made seeing him impossible. So I nudged Ethan, and when I had his attention, gestured my head toward Kevin. Ethan looked confused, and I pointed to my face. Ethan nodded, and seemed to be watching intently when we pulled into Karen's driveway.

Big, to his credit, said nothing. Kevin spoke up. "What are we doing here?"

"I need to ask the woman inside a question," I answered. "Come with us."

"I don't think so," Big intervened. "He doesn't get out of the car, and neither do I."

"He does," I countered. "I don't care whether you do or not, but Kevin's coming in with me."

"Why?" Ethan asked. Thanks, Ethan.

"Because I need to be sure he'll still be with us when we come out, since I need him at his mom's house."

"He'll be here with me," Big said. "I'll make sure he doesn't go anywhere."

We sat in the driveway, the heater running, on Christmas Eve Day, preparing to visit a woman who wasn't expecting us, but was home, as the Volkswagen Jetta in the driveway attested, and arguing about who would go inside. "There's no way I'm leaving you two out here," I told Big. "You didn't want him to come with me to begin with. You'll make him disappear before I get back. No way." Kevin wasn't crazy about the suggestion that he "disappear."

Big grinned. "Would I do that?"

"You can bet I'm not taking the chance."

He nodded, finally. "Okay. But I'll be outside the house. I don't need her seeing me." I didn't know why, since Karen wouldn't recognize Big, but it was fine with me that he stayed outside.

"You want to stay in the car?" I asked Big.

He shook his head. "No. I'll be outside, in case."

In case?

We walked to the front door, and Big walked to the side of the house, where he turned the corner and vanished. I rang the bell, and Karen soon came to the door.

“Aaron,” she said with some surprise, eyeing Kevin with some suspicion. “How are you?”

“Fine, Karen, but cold. May we come in?” She nodded, reluctantly, while studying Kevin and his biker accoutrements. We walked into the living room.

Dalma, now my closest friend on the planet, came over and gave us a lovely greeting, then happily sat on the rug next to Ethan. Go figure.

I reminded Karen that she knew Ethan, and introduced Kevin by first name only. No need to get her upset if it wasn’t necessary. “Karen, I don’t want to hold you up on Christmas Eve, but . . .

“It’s okay, Aaron,” she said. “I don’t plan on doing much celebrating.” Nice putting your foot in it, Tucker.

“Of course,” I nodded, looking as empathetic as I could. According to some theories, Asperger’s Syndrome carries a genetic component, and I might very well be walking, talking evidence there’s some validity to those theories. “I just wanted to ask about what you told me about Dalma, that she had bitten the person who shot Michael that night.”

Karen looked at Kevin, as if she’d put two and two together, but she didn’t say anything to him. Kevin did react when I mentioned the bite, and looked at the bandage on his hand involuntarily. “What about it?” she asked me.

“Was there anything besides blood on Dalma’s mouth? Clothing, fabric, maybe some leather?”

She thought for a moment, the tears coming to her eyes again as she remembered the one night she wished she could forget. “No,” she said. “I don’t remember anything. The only way I knew she’d done something was by the blood. Now, I can’t be sure if something dropped off on the way home, but I don’t think there was anything else there when she got to the house. I don’t know . . . I was so upset.”

Karen didn’t cry, but she would when we left. I wished I could spare her, but there wasn’t any way around it. “So if she’d bitten his hand, for example, there wasn’t any evidence the killer was wearing anything on his hand.”

“No,” said Karen, shaking her head definitively. “No, nothing.”

“Thanks,” I told her. “That’s all I needed to know. I hope I never have to bother you again, Karen. Please accept my condolences again, and if it’s

up to me, I'll leave you completely alone from now on."

"It's okay, Aaron," she told me. "I didn't mind the questions. It's the memories I wish I could erase."

I nodded. We stood and walked to the front door, where I knew Big would be waiting. Karen said goodbye to Ethan, and closed the door behind us.

I pulled Ethan to one side as we started for the van. "How did his face look when we pulled up here?" I asked.

"Whose face?" Asperger kids aren't necessarily the best lookouts.

"Kevin's face. I told you to watch him while we were pulling up."

"Oh," said my son. "Is that what you meant? I thought I had something on my cheek." Okay, so you can't get *every* clue.

As we walked back to the minivan, where Big was serenely seated in the second seat, I looked over at Kevin, who was gazing at the house behind him, a dim look on his face.

"Gloves are for pussies," I told him.

Chapter Eighteen



Ethan blankly stared at Kevin Fowler the whole way back to his family's home. No Asperger parent is flawless, and I'm not even in the top fifty percent. All I could think was, "Now he's watching the face."

Mary flung the door open wide before we made it up the stairs. "Kevin!" she shouted. "You came home for Christmas!"

Justin, face wary and anxious, stood behind her, and his gaze never left his brother. To Justin, no one else was standing on the steps at that moment.

From his mother's point of view, however, a giant faux pas had been committed, and she had to correct it. "Oh Aaron, I'm so sorry," she said. "I didn't even acknowledge you and Ethan. We're so glad you're here."

"I don't know if you'll be in a few minutes, Mary," I said. "May we come in and sit down? I'm afraid we have something important to discuss."

She glanced worriedly at Kevin as we came in. Big, of course, had made himself scarce outside the house, but she could still tell something was up. And I'd have been amazed if Big wasn't somewhere very close, where he could hear what was being said. I wasn't crazy about Ethan being in this environment, but I knew Big wouldn't present a danger, and would probably move to protect Ethan if trouble erupted.

Probably.

We sat in the living room, and even when Ethan tried to interest Justin in one television show or another in his own room, Justin would not be moved. I'd have to play out the scene with the whole family present.

"Mary, we found Kevin at the house of his friend, John Mahovic, at the address you gave me. He's been there all this time."

Mary's eyes narrowed. "You mean since he got back from Indiana?"

I gave Kevin an "am-I-going-to-tell-her-or-are-you?" look, but he didn't blink, and he didn't take his eyes off the floor in front of his chair. I inhaled heavily.

“He never was in Indiana, Mary. Kevin’s been lying to you about that for two and a half years.”

It took a moment to sink in, but then Mary appeared to be physically hurt, as if she’d been struck with something in her midsection. She winced and put her hands on her stomach. She actually moved back a couple of inches on her seat, and closed her eyes.

“Mary, are you okay?” I said. Kevin didn’t move a muscle, and continued to stare at the floor.

“Deep in my heart, I knew it,” she said. “I knew you didn’t get in to the university. Did you, Kevin?” He didn’t respond, and she lifted her head and injected a commanding tone into her voice. “*Did you?*” He shook his head miserably.

“Where have you been all this time?” his mother asked.

It took Kevin a long time to answer. “I’ve been . . . here . . . in Jersey . . . living in an apartment in Totowa.”

I didn’t have to ask any of the basic questions. Mary was going to take care of that for me. “You were living in Totowa and you didn’t even let me know?” she said, controlling her voice as best she could. Justin looked absolutely dumbfounded. Kevin nodded again. “*Why?*”

“Because I knew you wouldn’t like it, and you’d make me apply to colleges again.”

“You need an education. How are you going to make a living without an education?” Mary’s hands went to her face as the truth came crashing down on her.

Kevin’s head snapped up, his face red. This was the conversation he’d been having in his head for two years—the reason he’d never told his mother what she’d probably suspected from the beginning. He reached into the pocket of his leather jacket and pulled out a wallet, which he fanned in his mother’s direction. It was stuffed with bills.

“I’ve *been* making a living, Ma!” he shouted. “You want to see? I’ve been making *lots* of money. How do you think your precious Justin got out of jail? Huh? Where do you think the two hundred grand came from?”

Well, that was something I hadn’t expected, and Mary herself was dumbstruck. Justin, having been mentioned in the conversation, suddenly became attentive, and he looked at his brother with wide eyes.

“You mean *you* paid for me to get out of jail?” he asked Kevin. “Really? I didn’t think you liked me that much.”

Kevin, impressed with the level of authority he’d gained by being loud and abrasive, decided to continue being both. “I don’t!” he shouted. “I’ve never liked you! Everybody always had to tippy-toe around you. ‘Oh, don’t say that, it’ll upset *Justin*’ Or ‘We can’t go to that restaurant. They don’t have anything *Justin* will eat.’ Or ‘You can’t go out for the football team, Kevin—I have to work and there won’t be anybody to watch *Justin*.’ You were *eighteen years old* and we couldn’t leave you in the house by yourself! Jesus Christ, *Justin*. I’ve *never* liked you!”

Suddenly thrust into a Eugene O’Neill play, I was at something of a loss for the proper reaction. I was more at home in situations out of, say, Neil Simon.

Justin looked positively baffled. It wasn’t that he was sad or upset because his brother didn’t like him—it was more that his perception of his family had been changed, and he didn’t know how to react to it.

His mother did. “You take that back!” she shouted. “It’s a lie! I remember when you two used to play together and laugh and giggle all day long.” She put her head down, and I felt even worse about setting up this situation than I had before. It was time to press the issue at hand.

“Was that why you set Justin up for Michael Huston’s murder?” I asked Kevin. “Because you resented the attention he got?”

Kevin’s reaction stopped and started a couple of times. “I didn’t set anybody up for anything,” he said. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, you do,” I said. “You put the deringer in the bottom of that grandfather clock”—I pointed—“because you knew your brother would look there. You made sure he knew who’d put it there, because only you and he knew it was used as a hiding place. And when he found the gun there, and the police told him it had been used in a murder, Justin knew exactly what you had done, and he covered up for you. Didn’t you, Justin?”

Justin, his world not so much rocked as slightly vibrated, held fast to his prior statements. “No,” he said, shaking his head. “I shot Mr. Huston. I did it.”

“Fine. Why?”

“Because . . . because . . . Justin never did answer the question, but his meaningful gaze was straight and sure, and directed at his brother. He might just as well have said: “Kevin, what am I supposed to say?”

“You’re crazy,” Kevin said, directing his comment at me. “I didn’t shoot anybody, and I never had a gun, especially not some old antique gun like that.”

“Oh, really?” I was ready for this. I pulled the cell phone out of my pocket and dialed. “Hello?” I said. “Mr. Mitchell? Ted Mitchell of Brunswick Sporting Goods?”

Justin’s head snapped to attention, and Kevin stared at me, startled. He must have been just as startled as Leah, whose voice echoed through my cell phone, saying, “Daddy? Is that you?”

“Mr. Mitchell, this is Aaron Tucker. I know you don’t want to betray any confidences, but Justin’s life is on the line here, and he needs your help no matter how many times he’s told you not to talk,” I continued. “You have to help me help Justin, so tell me: It was his brother Kevin who was asking about the deringer, wasn’t it? And you told him to go buy one at a gun show out of state, because it couldn’t get traced? You never handled the gun yourself, did you?” I paused. “That’s what I thought.”

“He’s lying!” Kevin leapt to his feet. “*He* got me the gun himself! He just didn’t want anyone to know because it was illegal!”

“Should I get Mommy?” Leah asked.

“No,” I told the phone. “Thanks for your help.” And I turned it off even as Kevin was grabbing for it.

Once Kevin made his move toward me, the front door flew open and Big rushed in, grabbed Kevin, and pushed him out of the way. Big held him down on the rug, a grim expression on his face.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” he told Kevin. “At least, don’t do anything *else* stupid.”

Mary Fowler stared at Big and stood up slowly, her mouth agape. “Duane,” she said. “Duane Porter. Is that you?”

Big pulled Kevin to his feet and gave Mary a look of embarrassment. “Yes, ma’am,” he said. “Sorry about your door, Mrs. Fowler.”

Chapter Nineteen



“Duane?” I said to Big. “Your name is *Duane*?”

“You got a problem with that?”

Ethan stood up and reached out a hand. “Hi, Duane,” he said. “I’m Ethan.” Social skills groups—you can’t beat ‘em.

Big took his hand. “Hi, Ethan.” He held Kevin down with the other.

“You’re not going anywhere,” he said to Kevin.

“*Duane*?”

Mary stood up. “I don’t understand. What are you doing here?” she asked Big.

For the first time since I’d met him, Big seemed absolutely cowed. He didn’t want to look Mary in the eyes, and he didn’t say anything.

“Let me see if I’ve got all this straight,” I said. “You two”—indicating Big and Kevin—“know each other a long time, right?”

Big nodded. “High school,” he said.

“So you”—indicating Mary—“know *Duane* here as a friend of your son, right?”

Mary, mesmerized, nodded.

“Okay, I think I’ve got it. Duane here gets out of school and decides maybe Harvard isn’t for him, so he pulls in a couple of old connections, and gets himself a job working for—”

Big cut me off. “No names, please.”

I nodded, in deference to Mary. Kevin struggled under the weight of Big’s knee, which was on the side of his face, holding him to the floor. “Right,” I said. “A job working for a businessman with rumored connections to unsavory characters.”

“Well put,” said Big.

“I use words for a living,” I reminded him.

But Ethan couldn’t leave it alone. “You mean gangsters?” he said.

I chose to ignore him, but noticed that Justin's eyes widened once Ethan had clarified the situation for him. Mary, too, wasn't looking exactly pleased.

"So," I continued, "Duane here is performing whatever services are asked of him, and I'm willing to bet he's performing them quite well." I looked at Big, and he smiled.

"One does what one can," he said.

"And when Kevin, who doesn't want to go to college, gets out of school—what, a year or two later?—he talks to his pal Duane about a similar position."

Mary sat down hard on the overstuffed chair, not wanting to believe what she believed. "Kevin! Is it true? You're working for criminals?"

Big looked at Kevin's face and let him up off the floor, knowing his mother's horror had knocked the violence out of him. Kevin stood, but didn't look Mary directly in the eye.

"I'm not . . . I didn't . . . You don't understand, Ma. I made all this money . . . But Mary did understand, all too well, and her hand went to her mouth. I hadn't exactly delivered a Christmas present to her, and it was going to get worse.

"And then what?" I said. "I don't understand what happened with Michael Huston. Did your . . . employer . . . order you to do what you did?"

Big shook his head. "No. We've been looking for him since then. Nobody had any beef against this Huston guy. In fact, the first I heard of him was when he was dead."

"I didn't . . . Kevin tried, but it was too lame. "You have no proof."

"You bought the gun and you hid it here in the clock, where Justin found it. Its trigger is too small for heavy winter gloves, so the killer's hands were bare. You don't wear gloves, even in the coldest weather." For Mary's sake, I didn't reiterate his slogan about protective hand wear. "Karen Huston's dog came back to the house with blood on her mouth, and you have a bandage on your left hand, the one that wouldn't have been holding the gun."

"The dog never bit me," Kevin said. "That's a lie. I cut my hand on a fence when I was running away . . .

The words hung in the air for what seemed an eternity. The first thing Kevin had specifically disputed was the notion that he'd been bitten by Karen Huston's Dalmatian when he was busy shooting her husband.

"I mean . . . He began again, but it was too late.

"You did it, all right," said Big. "You shot him. And then you framed your own brother."

"I did not," Kevin said with a growl. "I didn't know he was going to find the gun. I didn't know the cops would come looking for him. I didn't know he was going to say he did it."

I don't get legitimately, blindly, violently angry often, no matter what my son tells you. But I practically leapt across the room at Kevin, and would have gone further, if he hadn't outweighed me by about fifty muscular pounds.

"Oh, give me a break!" I screamed at him. "Who do you think you're lying to? You took advantage of your brother's disability from the first minute, and you planned to use it to get rid of him as easily as you got rid of Michael Huston."

Kevin looked amazed, and I have to say, so did everyone else. I clenched my fists and turned away, a gesture Ethan knew well was an attempt to control myself while I spoke. "You could have bought any gun to kill Michael Huston, but you didn't—you bought a special replica, an antique that only a collector would find interesting. A gun buff, like Justin. You knew your mother wouldn't let him have a collection, so you bought something that special, that distinctive, with the hope it would attract the attention of the police. Then you hid it in a place you knew only Justin would look. You figured the cops would come, find the gun, and see Justin the way you saw him—stupid, annoying, and brain damaged, none of which he actually is. You played it just right to get the cops to suspect him."

I actually took a few steps toward him, but made sure I stayed short of his reach, even as Big moved in closer behind Kevin to assure nothing would go amiss. "What you didn't count on was that Justin—Asperger's or no Asperger's—would find the gun and, when the police arrived, understand what you'd done. And that he'd care enough to cover for you. *That he loved you enough to go to jail for you for the rest of his life.* That's what you didn't realize. But once it came about, you were only too glad to let it happen. So don't give me that bullshit about how innocent you are,

you bastard. You could have come out of hiding and saved your brother's ass anytime you wanted, but you let him take the fall for you."

Ethan, tickled that I'd used that kind of language in his presence, was still startled enough to ask Justin, "Did you really do that—confess for your brother?"

Mary, sobbing in her chair, put her head down, but Justin simply nodded and looked past Ethan. "Yeah," he said.

"Why?" Ethan asked.

"I don't know."

Even Big seemed a little taken aback by all that had happened. He shook his head a few times and seemed lost in thought.

"That's what I don't understand, Kevin," I told him. "If your boss didn't want Huston killed, why did you do it? Did he owe you money or something? How could you collect if he was dead? I don't get it, Kevin. Why?"

His upper lip curled and he looked at me. "I'll tell you why," he said.

Then, in one move, he turned and pushed Big backwards over the ottoman, and ran out the front door. He left it open, and the freezing wind blew through the room. Big was on his feet in a few seconds, and put his hand in his pocket, which I assume was an attempt to shield Mary from the fact that Big was pulling a gun to use on her son. He ran for the door and into the front yard.

But by the time he got there, Kevin Fowler was nowhere to be found.

Chapter Twenty



“We never should have brought him here to begin with,” Big said to me as we unlocked the minivan. “You realize, of course, that now I’m going to have to chase him down.”

“I figured that,” I said. I let Ethan into the van and closed the side door to get him out of the wind. “I assume the whole thing about protecting me and my family was really about being around me in case I tracked Kevin down.”

As I unlocked the passenger door, he grinned and shook his head. “You need to be more trusting,” he said. I opened the door, and he shook his head again. “The guys will come by in the car and get me,” Big said.

“Okay. I’ve still got a few stops to make myself. I assume you realize I’m going to have to call the cops and tell them what I know.” We walked around to the driver’s side.

“You have to do what you have to do,” he said. “I hope you won’t mention my actual name, though.”

I tilted my head a bit, thinking, but shook it. “No. It’s not my place to get you in trouble, although you might want to look into another line of work. You’re smart enough to do a good many things.”

“There are benefits to this,” was all he said.

We shook hands (well, gloves, really) and I got into the van, then rolled down my window as I started it up. “Hey,” I said. “Your real name is *Duane*.”

Big chuckled. “So is the Rock’s,” he said.

I closed the window and put the minivan in drive. As we pulled away, Ethan said, “The Rock’s real name is Duane? Really?”

I ignored it, and a little time went by with no sound as we headed home. There was time now to consider the fact that I’d just subjected my twelve-year-old son to a ride in a car and a dangerous situation with at least one cold-blooded killer, who didn’t hurt us because he was prevented by an

admitted gangster. I don't know why I had such confidence in Big, especially since it turned out he wasn't infallible in keeping an eye on Kevin, but I did. Based on the way he was watching us, I had known that Ethan's and my safety was his priority, and he'd see to it. Still, my judgment in bringing my son into this whole business was, at best, questionable.

"Were you scared?" I asked him out of the blue, and Ethan looked surprised.

"No," he said. "It was like watching TV. I was paying attention to the story."

"What did you think?" I'm not sure what I was looking for, but with Ethan, it's best not to have expectations, because they'll inevitably be exploded.

"Well . . . He seemed hesitant to explore his feelings, which was not unusual. That only awakened the nosy reporter in me.

"Well, what? Don't worry about my reaction."

"When you said what had happened, the only thing I could think of was that I wouldn't go to jail for Leah. I'd be too scared." He looked embarrassed, as if that was confessing he wasn't a good brother.

I smiled a little, trying not to look like I was laughing at him. "I don't think you'll have to make that choice," I said.

He looked at me sideways, then smiled. "No, I guess not." We both broke out laughing at the thought of Leah doing something worth jail time.

When the hilarity died down, I waited at a red light, then dialed

Lieutenant Rodriguez in North Brunswick. Strikingly, he was there, and when I told him what had transpired (minus Big's contributions), he immediately applauded my efforts and my resourcefulness.

"Are you crazy?" he said. "You could have gotten yourself *and* your son killed." Some people have a harder time expressing admiration than others.

"You're missing the big picture," I responded. "We know who killed Michael Huston, and we know it's not Justin Fowler."

"You don't know a damn thing. You just *think* you know," Rodriguez said. "There are two things *I* know."

"What?"

"First of all, we'd better find Kevin Fowler in a hurry. And second . . .

“Yes?”

“You’re making me work late on Christmas Eve. I want you to give me a written statement as soon as you can get here.” He hung up.

I was dropping Ethan off first, whether Rodriguez wanted to talk to him or not. Ethan had had enough. And then I could regroup and go down to talk to the lieutenant myself.

That *was* the plan, anyway, until out of the blue, my son turned halfway around in his seat to face me and said, “The dog didn’t growl when we came in.”

I came very close to slamming on the brakes. It took me a few long moments to collect myself and think things through, and then I handed Ethan the cell phone.

“Call your mom. She’s probably home early.”

He took it and started to push the number for home. I could have explained speed dial, but he knew the number, and what time was I saving? He stopped at the second four, and looked at me.

“What am I telling her?” he asked.

“That you just solved Michael Huston’s murder,” I said.

Chapter Twenty-One



Actually, I had more to say to Abby than Ethan did. As excited as he was at having noticed this important detail, Ethan was not entirely sure he should be happy that he'd figured out who killed someone.

Once I got on the phone with Abby, I asked for help with a question I'd meant to ask her days ago, but forgot. She admonished me for involving Ethan, but her heart wasn't in it, and as her lawyer instincts kicked in, she was anxious to put the right person behind bars. So we got off the phone quickly.

After about ten minutes, Ethan and I pulled up in front of our house and he shot out of the car and into the house. This is unusual—quite often, we arrive home and he'll sit in the car by himself for a few minutes, either unaware or unconcerned that we've reached our destination. In this case, I think Ethan wanted to get his mother's appreciation for the fine work he'd done, and maybe a hug, just to reassure him that he was, indeed, safe.

I could have used a hug, too, but Abigail was too caffeinated to worry about such things. I did notice, however, that Ethan got the affection, and I got the information. There are trade-offs one makes as a parent, and some of them aren't necessarily welcome.

"I've already found out most of what we need to know," she said excitedly, already using the royal "we" when as little as a day previously, she was quite happy to be excluded. Success has many fathers, or in this case, wives. "I looked up the lawyer you asked about."

"Arnold Rezenbach."

"Yes. Very interesting. He's supposed to be Karen Huston's tax lawyer?" Abby's lovely face was glowing with enthusiasm—she lives for this stuff.

"That's the way I understood it."

"Well, that's not his regular field. Rezenbach is a real estate lawyer. He farms out his tax work, and does a tiny bit of financial planning for a few

well-heeled clients. The idea that he'd be doing the taxes of a middle-class housewife, even one with a husband doing well financially, is pretty fishy." Abigail, her hair tied back in a ponytail, was almost too adorable to resist, but I did my best to concentrate on what she was saying.

"So Rezenbach is doing Karen Huston a favor for some reason," I said. "What's he getting out of it? You don't think there's a sexual thing going on between them, do you?"

"God, I hope not," Abby said, "not after the other little piece of information I gathered."

She gave me a devilish grin that, under most circumstances, would have been enough to distract me from, well, anything. But she was clearly bursting with her discovery, and wanted to present it to its full effect. Why not indulge a wife once in a while? She might indulge you.

"Okay, Marlowe. Spill it."

"It's amazing the things you can find online," she said, clearly having rehearsed this particular part. "I found Karen Huston's name in an Emerson College Alumni Magazine article, and that led to their engagement announcement from nine years ago." She paused.

"And . . . ?" I said, since that appeared to be my line.

"*And*, that led me to her maiden name. Karen Huston used to be Karen Rezenbach of Madison, New Jersey."

It took me a second. "She's his daughter. Okay. She's Arnold Rezenbach's daughter. So that makes it a lot *less* suspicious. Why shouldn't he be helping with his daughter's financial arrangements?"

Abby's grin got just a little bit more Cheshire cat-like. "All right, Nancy Drew," I said. "What else did you find out?"

"Here," she said, "is where it gets *really* interesting."

Chapter Twenty-Two



The drive up to Millburn didn't take long, but it was already after two on December 24th, and I could easily foresee that the traffic coming home would be heavier. There was no avoiding it, though. This trip was necessary to ensure my family's safety.

Luckily, the lack of a blindfold in the black SUV the last time I made the drive enabled me to note landmarks and street names, and I happen to have a very good sense of direction, as long as I stay out of lower Manhattan, where the streets no longer have numbers and everything is one way in the wrong direction.

I drove up to the gated home and spoke into the intercom. The gates opened, and I made my way to the front door after figuring out where a visitor might park his battered minivan with 122,000 miles on it. I was willing to bet this was the first such vehicle to make it up the drive since the last party here was catered.

The tall doors in the front of the house were opened very quickly by a man I hadn't seen before, leading me to believe that Big, Bigger, and Biggest were all out searching for Kevin Fowler, and that they were not the only employees here at the matzo ball compound. Without a word, a very large man escorted me back to the drawing room where I had been once before.

Hyman Shapiro, dressed in sweatpants and a 92nd Street "Y" sweatshirt, was walking on a treadmill I hadn't noticed on my previous visit. Being convinced your life is about to end might actually decrease the powers of observation. He wasn't walking fast, but he *was* walking.

"Aaron Tucker," he said as I came in and the enormous butler closed the door. "It's nice to see you, although I have to say, it's somewhat unexpected."

"Somehow, you failed to give me your phone number the last time I visited, or I would have called ahead," I said.

He chuckled, then turned off the treadmill, picked up a small towel hung on the handlebar, and wiped his face. "You're not afraid," he said, stepping off the machine and draping the towel around his neck. "I like that. I don't want people to be afraid of me. Well, most people, anyway." He chuckled again, this time at his own wit.

"Of course I'm afraid. I just cover it up better than most," I told him.

"Well, you're honest, too. Most people aren't." I didn't contradict that one, since discussing honesty with the Capo of the Knish seemed slightly surreal. "But I imagine you're not here simply because you've run out of Sonny's bagels." Shapiro sat behind his desk and drank from a bottle of Poland Spring water left there for that very purpose.

"You're right. I'm here because I found out who hired Kevin Fowler to kill Michael Huston."

He didn't so much as blink. "It wasn't me."

"I know."

"So why are you here?" He seemed genuinely puzzled, but I knew he wasn't.

"Because you do have an interest in it, and I need a certain degree of security. I want to know that you're not going to retaliate after I blow the whistle on the culprit. And please, if you really do value my honesty, don't pretend you don't know who the culprit is."

He frowned and drank more water. "Of course I know who it is," he said. "I've known from nearly the beginning, though if I'd known *before* the beginning, it wouldn't have happened. You know, I was asked first to take care of Huston, and I refused."

"I didn't know that, but I'm not surprised you refused. There was no upside in it for you." The smell of frying potatoes and onions from the kitchen, which must not have been far from here, momentarily broke my concentration. It seemed incongruous, but I was getting hungry.

"That's absolutely right. No upside. You're smarter than half the idiots who work for me. You know that?" I wasn't sure how to take the compliment, so I let it go. "But someone who worked for me wasn't as smart as you, and he took the job behind my back."

"Kevin Fowler."

"No names," he said testily. "I never discuss names in this room."

"Why, you got it wired, like Nixon?"

Shapiro didn't answer, so I assumed he was no longer as enamored of my wit. Just as well.

"So this person went out and took the money that was offered, and then did the thing. I didn't know about it. I didn't want it to happen." Shapiro might have been performing for the tape machine, but I believed what he was saying.

"I understand that. I'm just asking that you grant me immunity after I finish what I've started. The right people have to be in jail, and the wrong one has to stay out." After a while, you get the hang of this not-mentioning-names thing.

Shapiro shook his head. "I don't know that I can do that," he said.

"You're a nice man, Mr. Tucker, but this is different. This is family. You're not family."

I held my trump card for the moment, and pressed on. "It's not blood," I told him.

He raised his eyebrows and, closing his eyes, sniffed a little. "Family's family," he said. "You ever have a brother-in-law, Aaron?"

I rolled my eyes a bit and nodded.

"Then you know. My wife has been gone for seven years. And she was always close to her brother. How can I betray her trust like this? No, I'm sorry, Aaron. I like you, but I can't promise you anything if you turn everybody in. I can't offer you immunity or protection."

This was the answer I'd feared. "How about *my* family?" I said.

"That's something *you* have to consider. It's your choice, not mine. You do what you think is right, but you or those you love might suffer." That wasn't cute or cuddly at all. This man may have resembled my grandfather, but he wasn't my grandfather.

It was time to bring in the big guns. "I'm afraid that if anything happens to me, or someone I love, Isobel Ramirez is going to be very unhappy."

His eyes widened and stared at me. Luckily, I'd known Mrs. Mahoney's maiden name, so I didn't have to check with her son before bandying it about with a reputed multiple felon.

"Isobel Ramirez!" The special smile that an old man can conjure only for his first love found its way onto Shapiro's lips. "How do you know Isobel Ramirez?"

"Let's just say she insists I call her 'Mom.'"

He looked surprised, and assessed my face for traces of a resemblance. Naturally, he didn't find any. "You're her son?"

"I didn't say that."

Shapiro sat back in his chair, looking at me but not seeing me. "Isobel Ramirez," he said more softly. "That's a name I haven't heard in a long, long time."

"Actually, you heard it about a week ago when she called you for, let's say, human resources advice, but we'll put that aside because it's not relevant, although I have to say, for a guy who's a myth, you seem to know *everybody*. But more to the point, Isobel has a vested interest in me. She'd be very upset if something unpleasant were to befall me or my family." It was the first time in my life I'd used the word "befall," but I felt I'd saved it for the right moment.

"How is she?" The words practically escaped from his mouth, as if he'd been afraid to hear them aloud himself.

"Married," I said. "To a very nice man, for forty-seven years."

"You're not going to tell me her married name, are you?" Shapiro said, coming back to earth.

"I never mention names in this room," I told him. "Besides, if she didn't tell you her name, I don't see a reason I should. But I can tell you that a piece of correspondence is addressed to her, and if something were to happen to me, it would be delivered, and she would know exactly who to blame." Once again, it should have been "whom," but that just doesn't sound natural in conversation if your first name isn't "Sir."

"That's not playing fair, Aaron," Shapiro chided me. "Bringing up the past like that."

"You're a businessman, Mr. Shapiro. As you know, when the stakes are high, you use whatever you have."

He exhaled loudly and seemed to wilt in his chair. Finally, he looked like an old, old man.

"Okay, Aaron. You have my word. I won't lift a finger against you. But you know I'm not happy about it."

"I can live with that," I said. "Literally."

He nodded, then seemed to gather up his Jolly Jewish Imp persona and put it back on. Shapiro stood and motioned to me. I walked to him,

carefully, and he put an arm around my shoulder. He started leading me to the door.

“It’s almost Chanukah,” he said, “but I can’t wait. We’re making *latkes*. Can I get you some to take home?”

I shook my head. “My wife makes the best there ever were,” I told him. “She is to potato pancakes what Sonny Amster is to bagels.”

He looked impressed. “Wow,” Shapiro said. “I might have to come by and try some.”

“Anytime,” I said, “but don’t bring your friends.”

He chuckled. “Aaron, my word is my bond. You don’t have to worry about me or my employees anymore.” We were reaching the office door.

“There’s just one thing . . .

I stopped and braced myself. Shapiro’s eyes betrayed just a little hope.

“Does Isobel ever . . . talk about me?”

“How else would I know to mention her name?” I asked.

Hyman Shapiro’s face took on a glow. “Ah, Isobel Ramirez,” he said. “What a dish. If only she’d been Jewish . . .

Chapter Twenty-Three



Several cell phone calls and one time-consuming drive later, I was back at the North Brunswick home of Karen and, until recently, Michael Huston. In late December, the New Jersey sun doesn't stay out very late, and by the time I arrived, it was almost dark out. I sat in the minivan for a few minutes, then got out and looked up and down the street, checking to see which cars were parked in the driveway and nearby, and walked to the door to ring the bell.

The house bore no holiday decorations, as it hadn't earlier in the day, but with night falling, it was especially obvious on this street. All the other homes were so tastefully decorated, you wanted to throw tomatoes just to sully the perfection a little bit. I resisted the temptation. For one thing, I didn't have any tomatoes.

Karen, in a blue suit, looked surprised when she peered through the curtains to see who was on her porch. She came to the door and led me in to the warm room.

"Aaron!" she said. "I wasn't expecting you back today."

"I wasn't expecting it, either, Karen, but a lot has happened since I saw you this afternoon." I walked into the room, and was not the least bit surprised to see Rezenbach in the living room, holding a glass in his hand.

"Mr. Tucker," he said, "I was just stopping by to check in on . . .

"It's okay, Mr. Rezenbach," I said. "I'd expect you to be with your daughter on Christmas Eve."

Their reactions were a study in contrast. Rezenbach was stunned. His mouth opened just a bit, he stopped playing with the ice in his glass, and the wheels in his head were clearly trying to process the sentence he'd just heard. Karen, on the other hand, smiled a tiny smile and looked directly into my eyes without so much as losing a step on her way into the living room.

"Would you like a drink, Aaron?" she asked. "We have whatever you'd like."

“No, thanks, Karen. But I am wondering why you didn’t mention before that your lawyer is also your father.”

She motioned to a chair, for me to sit, and I did. Dalma walked over from her bed, wagging her tail and opening her mouth to let out her long, long tongue. Dalma loved me.

“I could say it never came up, but I suppose there was more to it than that,” Karen said, sitting, with a glass of eggnog or something in her hand. I stroked Dalma’s head, and she stayed with me.

“The ‘more’ being that you didn’t want me to look too far into what had happened with Michael, but you didn’t want Justin Fowler to go to jail, either. You were torn.” I watched for more reaction, and got one. Karen looked at her father, and seemed worried—about him.

“Dad, would you mind? Aaron and I need to discuss this privately, if that’s all right.” Rezenbach stared at her, and his expression was exactly the same as Mary Fowler’s had been earlier.

He was shocked.

“Karen, what does this mean? Did you have something to do with . . . He couldn’t finish the sentence, the thought being too awful even to consider.

“It’ll just take a minute, Dad. Please.” Karen stood and took his hand. “I promise, I’ll explain it all when you come back. Okay?”

Rezenbach wouldn’t have done it for anyone else, but for Karen, he nodded his head almost imperceptibly. “All right,” he rasped, and took a moment to pour more scotch into his glass before he left the room. I couldn’t imagine where he’d go or what he’d do. I was feeling uncomfortable, and I was here with his daughter, not asked to sit this one out while the murder of his son-in-law was discussed openly.

“All right, Aaron,” Karen said with a tone that seemed more suited to two close friends discussing a pie recipe. “What do you know?”

“Not as much as I thought,” I told her honestly. “I thought your father was involved in Michael’s murder, but clearly, he didn’t know what was going on.”

“My father!” she said. “I can’t imagine! Aaron, what were you thinking?”

“Don’t try it, Karen,” I told her. “I can make a very good case for the idea that you hired Kevin Fowler to kill your husband. What I can’t figure

out is why.”

“Me?”

Fine—she wanted the dog and pony show. I stood up. Dalma stood up. I patted her on the head.

“See that? That was what finally put it over the top. Dalma didn’t growl when we were here this afternoon.”

Karen tried to sell it as the wholesome girl explaining everything to the less-than-bright man in her midst. She rolled her eyes. “Aaron,” she said. “I *told* you about that. She doesn’t growl after she gets to know you a little, and she’d *never* growl at your adorable son.”

“That’s right,” I agreed. “But she didn’t growl at Kevin Fowler, either, and the only way that makes sense is if Dalma had met Kevin before, at least a few times. Like when you were hiring him to kill your husband.”

I thought Karen would continue her good-girl act, but she actually seemed to be fighting her emotions. She bit her lower lip and her head seemed to tremble a bit as she spoke.

“You think the fact that my dog didn’t growl at Mr. Fowler is enough to prove I asked him to murder . . . She sobbed unexpectedly, unable to say her husband’s name aloud.

“It ties together,” I said, unwilling to let the tears influence my attitude. “The dog knew Kevin. You probably made sure he’d drop by a number of times before the murder. So she wouldn’t attack him when she saw him that night. You got in touch with Kevin through his employer, your uncle, Hyman Shapiro.”

She looked up, and her eyes were truly tearing. She wasn’t trying to cry. “How did you know about my uncle?” she asked.

“A little Internet research.” No sense telling her it was Abby who discovered the link. “Your wedding announcement in the *Star-Ledger*’s files mentioned your mother’s maiden name. It didn’t take long after that to find articles alluding to a connection between her and Mr. Shapiro. He’s a famous man, for someone nobody ever sees. In fact, he seems to know more people in New Jersey than Bruce Springsteen.”

Karen nodded, acknowledging the point. “You’re a good reporter, Aaron. You should be working for the *New York Times*.”

“I’m not that good,” I said. “Some of this just fell into my lap. And the one thing I can’t begin to understand is *why*. Why kill Michael? By all

accounts, he was a candidate for the Husbands Hall of Fame. He really loved you.”

“Yes, he did,” she managed to get out. “Yes. He did.”

“Then, *why*?”

“Because he loved me too much,” she said quietly.

I sat there and looked at her for a long moment. “He loved you too much?” I said.

Karen’s glance, tearful though it was, held some anger as well. “Don’t you think I know how that sounds? He loved me too much. He used to write me love letters and leave them on my pillow at night. He’d tell me how much he needed me six different ways every day. He made me the center of his universe, and nothing I ever did was anything less than perfect.”

“Sounds awful,” I said.

Her face cooled considerably, and her voice dropped half an octave. “You can’t possibly imagine what kind of responsibility that is, Mr. Tucker,” Karen said. “To know that you mean so much to another person that they don’t think they could *live* without you? You hear that in lyrics to stupid pop songs, but you don’t have to actually deal with it. Michael sincerely believed that if I weren’t with him, he wouldn’t have the strength to go on. Do you know what that does to a person, to bear that load every minute of every day?”

“No,” I said. “But I know what it is to feel that for another person.”

Karen composed herself, but her mouth was still tight, her eyes narrow. “No, you don’t,” she said. “You think you do, but this was not a normal range of emotion. When I met Michael, I’d been through a series of emotionally abusive relationships, so I figured that a man that devoted was what I needed. But through the years, he wore me down. I couldn’t ever love him as much as he loved me—I couldn’t ever give him what he needed. I kept coming up short in his eyes, I could tell, but he wouldn’t admit it. He would assume everything was his fault, since I was perfect. I became his whole world. We never had children because Michael didn’t think he could concentrate emotionally on anyone else, and I think he was afraid I’d love the baby more than I loved him. It took forever before he’d let me get a dog, and sometimes—I swear—I think he was jealous of her, too.”

I looked at Dalma, who stared up at me, grinning, begging for affection. Maybe I had a small idea of what Karen meant.

“So you decided to murder him? You couldn’t just go to couples counseling like everybody else?”

Karen shook her head. “That would have been admitting there was a problem, and Michael didn’t want to consider our marriage as anything but perfect. If I ever suggested he was a little . . . suffocating, he’d go into a deep depression for days. He wouldn’t eat. He’d barely sleep. He kept saying that I didn’t understand, that he *needed* me, like oxygen, and that he’d never do anything to make me unhappy.”

“But you were unhappy.”

She looked down. “God help me, yes. I was terribly unhappy. And I couldn’t see any other path than to end it for both of us as swiftly as possible. When I got in touch with Uncle Hyman, he said he wouldn’t help me. Said he was a ‘businessman,’ and he didn’t kill people randomly—the hypocrite. But Kevin was in the room, standing guard, when I met with my uncle. They’re not supposed to listen, but he did. And he offered me a way out.”

“How much did you pay him?”

“Two hundred thousand dollars,” she said. “It was Michael’s money. He had accounts everywhere, and he gave me access to everything, to show what an open and trusting relationship we had. He was making a lot of money, and he encouraged me to use it if I had to. Michael never knew the money was missing. The statement came a week after he died.”

My chest was getting itchy, and I realized I was sweating, the first time I’d truly felt warm in weeks. “So the story about the threatening phone calls . . .

“A lie. I made that up entirely. Just like I made up the story about Dalma biting the man who shot Michael.” Dalma, at the sound of her name, walked to her mistress and sat down for a scratch behind the ears. “You wouldn’t do that, would you, girl?” Karen said, only half thinking about what she was saying.

“Why make up stories?” I asked. “Why not just let Justin Fowler railroad himself into jail? He confessed, after all.”

“I couldn’t,” Karen said, focusing her attention on me again. “I didn’t know Kevin would go out of his way to implicate his brother, and I

certainly didn't know Justin would confess to the crime, knowing he didn't do it. But once he did, I had to try to find a way to keep him out of jail without giving myself and Kevin away. As it turned out, I couldn't do that."

"Did you have second thoughts the night Michael was shot?"

Karen thought about that, as if for the first time. "I don't know," she said. "I didn't want Michael to suffer, but he had to be gone. Still, sending him out to walk Dalma that night, knowing he wasn't coming back . . . She sniffed and was silent for a moment. "I really did love him, but I couldn't ever love him enough."

"There were ways short of murder. Why couldn't you just ask for a divorce?"

Without a hint of irony in her voice, she said, "I sincerely believe that would have killed him." And her face became blank again, perhaps as she listened to her own words for the first time.

I stood up. "I can't say I understand it, Karen, but I can see the pain you're in. I'm sorry. But it's time to go to the police now."

"There's no need for that, Mr. Tucker." Rezenbach, standing in the doorway, his face wet with tears, was still very much a lawyer. "You've got no admissible evidence."

"I have a confession," I told him.

"You have hearsay. Once we're out of this room, it's your word against mine and Karen's, and there's no way we'll ever corroborate your story. If necessary, I'll make sure Karen was with me the night of the crime, and I'll deny she ever went to see my . . . brother-in-law."

Karen walked to her father. "Dad," she said, but that's as far as she got.

I reached under my coat, my sweatshirt, my shirt, and the t-shirt underneath, and showed Rezenbach what he didn't want to see: the wire running up to a small microphone taped to my chest.

"I think that's enough, Lieutenant," I said, and within seconds, Rodriguez was in the door as Karen and Rezenbach stood expressionless.

"You got what we need, Tucker," Rodriguez said. "Thanks for that. But like I told you in the van when we were wiring you up, it was hard enough hearing through the seventeen shirts. You didn't need to keep scratching."

"I wasn't scratching. I was petting the dog."

Dalma growled at Rodriguez and the other cops who followed him in, handcuffed Karen, and took her and her father outside. But she didn't make

a move to attack any of them, and I stroked her head.

“Who’s going to take care of the dog?” I asked Rodriguez.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Take her to a shelter, I guess.”

“Shame,” I told him. “Why don’t you take her? She’s a nice dog.”

Dalma bared her teeth and kept up the low rumble in her throat. “I don’t know,” said Rodriguez. “She doesn’t seem to like me much.”

“Give her time,” I said.

The police being what they are, Rodriguez made me stand outside for a while in the freezing night before letting me off the hook.

“So she paid Kevin two hundred grand to kill the guy because he was too good a husband,” he marveled, shaking his head. “Makes you wonder.”

It was making me wonder about a good many things, including why I was freezing my butt off outside Karen’s house when we could be having this conversation in the nice, warm house. Cops like you to be uncomfortable when you talk to them, because they think it gives them the upper hand. But Rodriguez was just as cold as I was, so I failed to see the logic.

“Fowler didn’t put up the money to bail out his brother,” Rodriguez said. “He kept that money and got Karen to call her Uncle Shapiro for the bail. Can you imagine?”

“And Shapiro paid it? Nice guy.”

“That’s what he’d like you to think,” Rodriguez said.

We jostled for a few minutes over my statement, which he wanted taken at the North Brunswick station that night. I told him he already had the statement taken here and the recording of my conversation with Karen, and I’d be happy to come in to answer any further questions tomorrow.

“Tomorrow’s Christmas.”

I shrugged. “Your holiday, not mine,” I said.

“Come in Friday. And Tucker, we still haven’t found Kevin Fowler. He might not feel too fondly about you right now. I’d stay indoors tonight if I were you. Your family, too.”

“That’s my plan. Merry Christmas, Lieutenant.”

He smiled and turned away. “*Good yom tov*,” Rodriguez said.

Chapter Twenty-Four



“No, you don’t love me too much,” Abby said wearily. “You love me just the right amount. So can we drop it now?”

Dinner had been over for about a half hour, but Abigail and I had stayed in the kitchen, sitting at the table for a good while as the rest of the folks dispersed. Now, we were cleaning up said kitchen, as usual without any assistance from the aforementioned Steins under our roof. I was loading the dishwasher while Abby sponged off our large, faux ceramic tile kitchen table.

“It’s just that I saw a lot of parallels,” I told her. “I send you flowers. I spend my day thinking of ways to tell you *I love you*. I cook your dinner.”

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that . . . she began.

“You know what I mean.”

Abby walked to where I was standing and put her arms around my waist. Since I had no objection to this, we stood there that way for a while. Then she said, “Karen Huston is trying to justify what she did. She didn’t kill her husband because he loved her too much—she killed him because she didn’t love him *enough*. She got involved with him because he was better than the abusive jerks she was used to. I got involved with you because I love *you*.”

I kissed her, because that’s my second favorite form of recreation. “But you don’t seem to expend as much energy at it as I do,” I said.

“In that sentence, the important word was ‘seem,’” said Abby. “I love you just as much, but I don’t put on a show about it. I think private things should be private.”

“You could tell me when we’re alone,” I suggested.

“Later.”

Given that piece of encouragement, I went back to my task, and Abby attacked our marble-pattern countertop, which was installed by the previous owners of the house, whom we have dubbed “The Sadists.” I personally

believe the house was designed by Stevie Wonder, with no professional assistance whatsoever. But then, nobody can touch Stevie musically. We each have our strengths.

Howard's strength was being awkward, so it was no surprise to see him in the doorway to the kitchen, clearing his throat theatrically and looking to see if it had gotten our attention. I worried that he might have heard some of our conversation while standing there, but there was nothing to be done about that.

Abby looked at him, probably thinking the same thing. "What is it, Howard?" she asked.

"We—that is, Andrea and I—oh, and Dylan, of course—we thought that since this is our last night here, and what with Chanukah" (he pronounced it without the "Ch," as if there were an "H" at the front of the word) "so close, well, we have some gifts for you . . . if you'd like to come in."

Abby looked at me, giving me the opportunity to respond. What the hell, I'd take it. "That's very nice of you, Howard. Thanks. We'll be inside in a minute," I said. Howard turned and walked out, probably grateful that he hadn't had to say more, and I gave Abby a panicky glance.

"We don't have anything for them, do we?"

She smiled. "I was going to send them. They're upstairs in a Target bag next to our bed."

I kissed her again. "You're perfect, you know."

"Don't start," Abby told me. "Man can get shot talking like that."

I went upstairs and found the bag—Abby hadn't just bought the presents, she'd wrapped them, the little minx. I met the others in the living room. Abby had dusted off—literally—our menorah, and was trying to find candles that would fit, since we always leave such things for the last minute, which was still forty-six hours away.

We managed to discover just enough candles (you only need two the first night of Chanukah, and this wasn't even that) left over from the previous year, and approximated a Jewish festival celebration. We sang the prayer, or as much of it as we could remember, and Ethan got to light the candles. Ethan has a rather unhealthy fascination with fire, so he wasn't necessarily paying attention during the whole "singing the prayer" part of the festivities.

When we got down to the serious part of the evening—gifts—my children were as attentive as they ever get, sitting in the living room, near the non-functional fireplace, anticipating the great bounty that was soon to be theirs.

They, of course, had forgotten that this was their Uncle Howard giving the presents. Leah, given the store-wrapped box to open (with the store's logo on the paper), could barely contain herself, until the ritual shredding of the paper revealed a Barbie doll. Leah gave up Barbie roughly two years ago, and now disdains the brand (and, to be fair, dolls generally), calling it "dumb." This particular Barbie was dressed as a flight attendant, which suits my daughter about as well as working at Disney World would suit Marilyn Manson.

"Thank you," she said by rote, and her aunt and uncle bought it as sincere. Leah's eyes were already glazed over as she estimated what she might be able to exchange the gift for on Thursday. I groaned inwardly, thinking about what toy stores were going to look like the day after Christmas.

Ethan's gift was a subtler affair. For one thing, those on the autism spectrum tend to be very, very specific about the kinds of gifts they like. We actually ask Ethan to compile a written list of acceptable gifts each year, and he does so with great care, spending considerably more time on that than he does on his homework. Howard and Andrea, because they'd been in our house for a week, had certainly had access to the list, but had chosen, in this case, to ignore it.

They had bought Ethan "Trouble," a hopelessly juvenile game for a twelve-year-old, and one which, knowing Howard, had been purchased with an eye toward economy rather than true affection.

"It's 'Trouble,'" Ethan, ever the diplomat, grumbled. "I think I had this when I was five."

"Oh, my," said Andrea. "Dylan assured us it was something you'd adore." Dylan, seated to the left of his mother, smiled a truly evil smile. I hoped Abby had gotten him a bag of three-day-old calamari.

Alas, my wife is a far nobler person than I am, since she'd bought Dylan a PlayStation 2 game cartridge with characters I didn't recognize on the cover. Ethan's eyes practically popped out of his head when he saw it, and Dylan must have realized how serious a prize he'd won when his

grandparents had decided to provide him with an aunt, because even he couldn't mask his enthusiasm thanking Abby for the gift.

Ethan looked like he might actually go off in a huff and chew nails, but he bravely kept it together, and I made a mental note to tell my son how proud I was of him for doing so. There have been times when he would not have held in his surely growing resentment of his cousin.

"It's funny," Howard said. "We were going to get one of those for Ethan, but Dylan said he'd like the board game better. Besides, do you know how much those video games cost?"

"Yes," I said. "We do."

Gifts among the adults followed, after Dylan, grumbling that he couldn't play his game on Ethan's antiquated system, and Ethan, grumbling in general, left to argue elsewhere. Leah, who loves to see people get presents, stayed.

While we were exchanging boxes, Warren ambled in, no doubt after checking the clock. It was a half hour later than he and Abby usually left for their evening walk. Warren, an Asperger's dog at heart, does not happily abide changes in routine.

Abby had given Andrea a pair of very nice earrings (at least, everyone seemed to agree they were very nice—the whole earring thing has never made much sense to me), and Howard a warm sweater to get him through the Minnesota winter. Abby's brother and sister-in-law had given her a new cookbook, which could be seen either as gift or message. Abby chose "gift," and I left my vote uncast.

"I feel awful, Aaron," Howard said, "but we seem to have forgotten to buy a present for you." This neither surprised nor angered me, since I'm a very mature and evolved person—also because the cheap crap that Howard buys is hardly worth mourning over. Leah, the thrill of gift-giving having passed, went up to her room to further consider her upcoming Barbie exchange.

"I'll tell you what, Howard," I said. "We'll call it even if you take Warren for his walk tonight."

Howard looked as if I'd asked him to clean out a Superfund site with a cotton swab. "Excuse me?" he said.

"With Kevin Fowler still on the loose, Lieutenant Rodriguez warned me not to go out or to let my family outside tonight," I told him. "I think it

might be dangerous for Abby to take the dog, and worse for me.”

“It’s okay,” Abby said. “I’ll go.”

“No, you won’t,” I insisted. “There’s no way I’m risking you. I’ll let the dog have multiple accidents in the house, but I’m not letting you go out there until Rodriguez says it’s okay. I can’t call Barry Dutton on Christmas Eve and ask him for a police escort for my wife and dog. It makes the most sense for Howard to go.”

Howard’s eyes registered inconvenience, annoyance, and, yes, a little fear. “So you’re saying I’m not family,” he attempted.

“No, I’m saying that Kevin Fowler in all likelihood doesn’t even know I have a brother-in-law, certainly doesn’t know what you look like, and probably isn’t bright enough to be watching the house, if he even knows which house to watch.” Howard sat back farther on the couch, cementing himself to the cushion in a defiant gesture, as if to say: “Just *try* to get me off this sofa!”

“I really don’t think there’s danger,” Howard said. “You should go if you’re worried, Aaron.”

I was about to respond when my wife, with pure fury on her face, stood up and pointed at him. “Howard Stein, you get your butt off that couch and walk the dog this instant. It’ll take you ten minutes and cost you nothing. I will *not* jeopardize the man I love most in this world because you don’t want to be inconvenienced!”

Andrea’s eyebrows may actually have been orbiting around her head at this point. Howard, astounded by the outburst from his little sister, stood and walked to the door, where Warren’s leash is kept, and picked it up.

Warren, puzzled by the change in routine, didn’t come to Howard immediately, but with the leash in his hand, Howard seemed the most logical choice, and the dog approached after a moment. Howard turned to open the door, but I stopped him. I think he looked a little relieved, like I was going to absolve him of his sudden responsibility.

“Here,” I said, and handed him a plastic bag.

Howard scowled, put the bag in his pocket, and led the dog out the front door into the impossibly cold night. He seemed to be adding drama to a task that, as Abby pointed out, would only take him ten minutes.

The problem was, he wasn’t back in ten minutes. He wasn’t back in thirty minutes, either.

Chapter Twenty-Five



“Don’t you think we should call the police?” Andrea asked, pushing aside the curtains and looking out the front window.

“And tell them what?” I asked. “That a grown man has been walking the dog for half an hour?”

“Does he have his cell phone?” Abby asked her sister-in-law.

Andrea shook her head. “No. It’s charging. He wanted it fully charged before we got on the plane.” I wanted to point out that they make you turn cell phones off on planes. In my opinion, Howard was trying to get a phone charge using someone else’s electricity (ours). But I reconsidered, thinking it unwise to speak ill of the missing.

Abby shot me a look of real worry, and I stood up. “That’s it,” I said. “I’m going out to find him.”

“Aaron! You can’t!” Abby walked to me and looked me in the eye.

“Well, I can’t leave him out there, and I’m sure as hell not letting you go. Don’t worry. I’ll take *my* cell phone, and I’ll dial 911 in advance. If something happens, all I’ll have to do is hit ‘send.’ Okay? If I don’t find Howard in ten actual minutes, I’ll come back and go looking for him in the car.”

Abby thought about it. “No. It’s too dangerous.”

I had quick flashes of Kevin, holding a knife to Howard’s neck, lying in wait for me. In truth, I was more concerned about Warren’s safety, but still, I was concerned.

“Abigail,” I said, “he’s your brother.”

“You’re my husband. I’m not going to risk losing both of you.”

You probably noticed that Andrea hadn’t offered to search. After the way we’d coerced Howard, I was afraid to ask her, thinking she’d probably decline.

“You’re not risking me,” I told Abby. “I’ll be back in ten minutes.” I put on my coat and gloves.

“That’s what Howard said.”

“Yeah, but Howard discounts everything. He probably meant ten minutes marked down from fifty.” I checked my coat pocket for the phone—it was there. “Don’t worry.”

Abby walked me to the door and kissed me, then kissed me again. I held her as long as I could, then opened the door.

“I’ll be back,” I said. I didn’t have the heart to do my Schwarzenegger impression.

The first thing my brain registered was *COLD*! Then came dark, but that wasn’t as bad. The streetlights were on, and a number of houses on the block had lit Christmas decorations.

I had no idea where Howard might have taken the dog, so I decided to follow my usual route, and headed toward Edison Park. I knew the park would be closed, but Howard didn’t necessarily know that.

En route, the usual hazards presented themselves. A patch of ice was on the hill heading down to the park, possibly from water someone had dumped after last-minute Christmas cleaning. There was debris from other dogs whose owners weren’t the fine citizens Abby and I are. And there was a wind in my face that made it hard to keep my eyes open.

But no brother-in-law and no dog were in sight.

I reached the edge of the park, where there’s an open field, and looked in. The streetlights in the park were not turned on (the cops think this deters teenagers, when in fact it attracts them), so it was hard for me to see very far. I decided to risk calling.

“Howard? Howard!” Nothing.

“Warren, *come!*” It was worth a shot. I turned the other way.

“Warren!”

“No,” said a voice behind me. “But I’m here.”

Before I could move, a hand was on my mouth.

A hand with no glove.

A hand with a bandage on it.

Kevin Fowler’s hand.

Then Kevin’s right arm circled my waist as best it could, with the coat and all the shirts underneath, and held me close. Then the left hand came off my mouth, and I felt it in my back. Holding a gun.

“This isn’t some little deringer that’s nice and painless,” he said. “This is a Glock. This will hurt. Do you understand?” I nodded. “Good. So I don’t have to tell you not to yell.”

“What did you do with my brother-in-law and my dog?” I asked.

“You have a brother-in-law and a dog?” Swell. I was going to get killed for absolutely no reason at all.

“What good is this going to do you, Kevin?” I said. “The cops are after you already.”

“Yeah, thanks to you,” he sneered, pushing me toward the blackness of the park. Against my will, I began to walk. “So I might as well get the revenge I want, right, Tucker? They can’t execute me twice.”

“Michael Huston was a contract killing,” I told him. “You might only get jail time.”

“Life in prison? I’d rather be executed,” Kevin said. All you death penalty-as-deterrent types, you might want to highlight the previous two lines.

If I were Harrison Ford, or even Keifer Sutherland, I could use that nifty move you’re always seeing heroes use when there’s someone behind them with a gun. They elbow the guy in the ribs, make him drop the gun, win the ensuing fistfight, and march him off to jail, or drop him (via his own clumsiness) off a conveniently placed cliff. Unfortunately, being neither Harrison nor Keifer, nor having their writers working for me, I knew that if I tried to elbow Kevin in the ribs, he’d shoot me. If I got past that, and he dropped the gun, he’d kick my ass in the ensuing fistfight.

Then, he’d shoot me.

I had no choice but to walk deeper into the park. My eyes were adjusting to the dark, but it was still very hard to see. Finally, behind trees to shield us from the street, Fowler stopped me and held me tightly from behind. I felt the frigid barrel of the gun against my left temple, yet Leah crying for Daddy didn’t flash before my eyes. Nothing flashed before my eyes. It was too dark.

But my cell phone rang.

It startled Kevin enough to hear the phone in my coat pocket that he flinched for a second, and then I felt him being pulled away, from right to left. I spun, and saw, about fifteen feet away, a huge shadow. The shadow, in a form approaching human, was pummeling something on the ground.

Over and over, a tremendous fist flew through the air and hit something near the ground. I gained my footing, and ran toward the shadow, pulling my cell phone out as I ran.

After a moment, the shadow stopped punching and rose. And rose. And rose some more. I looked up, my eyes adjusting.

Finally, I could see that the shadow was Biggest. He looked down to make sure the supine figure of Kevin Fowler was not conscious. Believe me, it wasn't.

What did you think—that I was going to get shot? Haven't you noticed this is all written in the first person?

"Oh my god," I said. "All this time, you've been protecting me from *him*."

Biggest turned to me, smiled, and spoke, with, of all things, a remarkable upper class British accent. "Quite something, wasn't it?" he said. "I saw you back there on the bluff, you know, but I couldn't make a move while he had the gun in your back. Once he moved it, and the cell phone rang, I could get him away from you with no problem at all" (he pronounced it "a-tall").

"You can talk," I said. It was the best I could do.

"Quite," he said. "Well, I suppose we should do something about our friend back there."

"Yes," I answered. It was hard not to emulate the accent. "I'm going to have to call the police."

"That's actually not what I've been told to do," Biggest replied. "I'm supposed to bring him back to our 'mutual employer.'" By "our," he meant himself and Kevin.

"I realize that," I said, "but I can't allow it, I'm afraid." In another minute, I'd be inviting him in for tea and scones. "Procedure, and all that, you know."

He looked down at me from the rarefied air he breathed up there. "I could insist."

"You could, and I'd be at a loss to resist, but I don't think your employer would look upon that very kindly."

Biggest nodded. "Quite right. Very well, then, we'll play it your way. But you do realize I'll have to make myself scarce before the police arrive."

I nodded. “Naturally. Do you think I have to worry, or will he remain unconscious for a sufficiently lengthy duration?”

Biggest, who had knelt to pick up Kevin’s gun, put it into his parka pocket. I noticed he was wearing gloves. “Not to worry,” he said. “He’ll be out quite some time, I should think.”

He started to turn, and I touched him on the arm, because I couldn’t reach his shoulder. He turned back.

“I didn’t thank you,” I said, stumbling over the words.

“A pleasure.” He smiled, actually tipped his hood at me, and ambled off.

I picked up the cell phone, which had started ringing again. It was Abigail.

“Aaron, I was frantic! Are you okay?”

“It’s all over now, honey, and I’m fine. Just another day at the office, but with guns. I’m calling the cops, and that’ll be it.”

“Guns! What . . . ?”

“Don’t worry,” I told Abby. “I’m absolutely fine. But I didn’t find Howard.”

“That’s what I was calling to tell you,” she said. “He showed up here five minutes ago. Said it was such a nice night, he decided to take the dog for a good long walk.”

“Figures.”

“You’ll be home soon? I’m still a little scared.” So she did love me, after all.

“As soon as the cops let me go, I’ll be home, Abby.”

So I called the Midland Heights police, and Officer John Crawford and his new partner were there in seconds. “Merry Christmas,” I told them when they arrived.

Crawford assessed the scene: me, with no weapon, standing over the comatose figure of Kevin Fowler, who had clearly been pummeled to a bloody pulp. Then he looked at me again.

“Okay, here’s my guess,” he said. “He fell on a rock seventeen times.”

“You don’t think I could do that to him?” I tried my best to sound insulted.

He looked at me for a very long time. “No.”

“Would you believe I found him like this?”

Slightly shorter pause. "No. You called 911."

"I did, but because I found a guy lying in the park."

"You told them you were being attacked."

"Oh, yeah." He had me there.

"So what happened?" Crawford said without a smile, but then he's never smiled in my presence.

"He was threatening me, and another guy beat the crap out of him, but he left."

"Who was the other guy?"

"I have no idea," I answered.

Chapter Twenty-Six



The cops kept me for a while, and then Rodriguez called, and *he* kept me for a while. Though I got home relatively soon afterward, most of the rest of the family had already gone to bed. Abby, who had stayed up for me, made the wait worth waiting for, and that's really all you need to know.

I slept in Christmas morning, and when I finally dragged myself out of bed at ten-thirty, I was still a little groggy. It had been something of a rough week.

So, with a surreal feeling, I walked into my kitchen and saw a man who looked a lot like Howard Stein entertaining my family with what seemed to be a very amusing anecdote.

"So there I was, dressed from head to toe in bandages, walking into the Port Authority Bus Terminal in Manhattan, and having people stare like this"—he made a face. The kids roared with laughter. "And when I got to the ticket booth . . . Aaron! Good morning!" Howard stood up and everyone else at the table turned to look at me. Since I had only put on a pair of sweatpants and a sweatshirt, hadn't combed my hair or shaved, I figured they were staring because of my appearance. Not so.

"Uncle Howard is telling us a funny story about a Halloween party he went to when he was in college!" Leah gushed. "It's really funny!"

"Yeah, Dad," said Ethan. "He was dressed as the Invisible Man, and he had to get from New York to New Jersey in his costume."

"Sit down, honey," said Abby, and she actually went to the stove and poured me a cup of honest-to-goodness hot chocolate made from scratch. I started to worry they'd been told I had a terminal disease, and were being nice to me for the short time I had left.

"How did you sleep, Aaron?" asked the man pretending to be Howard.

"Who are you, and what have you done with my brother-in-law?" I asked.

Howard laughed. “You always *were* funny, Aaron.” I shot Abby a look that said, “Who *is* this man?”

“If everyone at this table under the age of sixteen is finished,” Abby said, “could they please go to their rooms and get dressed?”

The kids grumbled. “But we haven’t heard the end of the story!” Leah said.

“Don’t worry,” said Howard. “I’ll tell it to you on the way to the airport.”

And amazingly, that did it. The children got up and walked to their rooms without so much as a residual whine. But on the way out, Dylan said quietly to Ethan, “I get to go home and play a *real* video game today. Not your *baby* game.” And before I could say a word, Howard stood up and pointed a finger—at his son.

“Dylan,” he said, “you’re going to be civil to your cousin, who’s given half his room to you for a week. And if you’re not, you won’t be playing video games until sometime next year.”

“But Dad,” Dylan began.

“Is that clear?” Howard emphasized.

“Yeah, it’s clear.” Dylan slunk off, and the adults were left alone.

I wondered if I had awoken in an alternate universe, but Abby was still beautiful and the hot chocolate still tasted wonderful. Perhaps it was a selective alternate universe.

Once the kids were gone, Abby looked at me and said, “I think I’ll check the laundry.” This was a surprise, too, since I always do the laundry, at least until it needs to be folded.

“Laundry?” I asked.

“Yeah, you remember. How clothes get clean?” She left for the basement before I could wonder, and there I was, alone, with Howard and Andrea. I waited for the mask to slip off and for the real Howard Stein to appear, but no such thing happened.

Howard cleared his throat a couple of times. This appeared to be his way to indicate he was going to speak. “Aaron, I just want you to know that I’m . . . sorry about the way I’ve treated you for, well, pretty much all the time we’ve known each other.”

Now, I knew. Abby had slipped some hallucinogen into my hot chocolate, or his coffee. I pinched myself. It hurt. I knew I was awake.

“You are?” is the best I could manage.

“Yes, well . . . Howard’s eyes searched his frontal lobe for the right words, but he couldn’t find them.

“I think what Howard’s trying to say is, well, he learned something about you last night,” Andrea said, “when you went out to find him even though you knew it could be dangerous.”

“And it *was* dangerous,” Howard added. “I think maybe I’ve misjudged you, Aaron.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I answered. “I’m still the same guy you’ve found irritating and underachieving all these years. I’m still not good enough for your sister.”

Howard puffed out his lips. “Apparently, she thinks otherwise,” he said. “When she insisted I walk the dog to keep you safe last night, that was the first time Abby openly defied me since our father died. To do that, she has to feel pretty strongly about you.”

“The fourteen-year marriage, the two kids, and the thirty-year mortgage weren’t enough to convince you?” I asked. “Does she do that with everybody she finds mildly amusing?”

“Boy,” said Howard, chuckling, “you don’t make it easy.”

“I had a gun held to my head last night,” I said. “I’m not in a real bouncy mood.”

“Well, please think about my apology,” he said. “And let me know if you accept it.”

I smiled. “I’ll tell you what I tell the kids, Howard,” I said. “I accept your apology, but I’ll be on the lookout to make sure you don’t do the same thing again. There’s nothing wrong with making mistakes . . . *if* you learn from them.”

“Fair enough,” Howard said.

What happened next is a bit blurry. Their Christmas Day flight left early in the afternoon, so we didn’t have a whole lot of time to spare. The usual getting-the-family-out-the-door nonsense ensued, but baggage and personnel were conveyed to Newark Liberty International on time. Security concerns made it impossible to enter the gate with the travelers, and Howard wouldn’t pay for parking—some things *never* change—so we said our goodbyes at the drop off curb, and headed home.

The Tuckers' Christmas tradition was then observed, with a family outing to the movies (Ethan is currently obsessed with Adam Sandler) and our favorite Chinese restaurant, which serves the one and only General Tso's chicken my son will deign to eat. We weren't the only ones at dinner, but it was pretty close. The waiter sat and talked to us for twenty minutes, and, on the house, brought everyone ice cream for dessert because Leah, fresh from Chinese classes at school, could count to ten in Mandarin.

After we got home, Abby walked the dog without incident, and we watched our traditional Christmas video together: Jean Shepherd's *A Christmas Story*. Shepherd, at least, had attitude.

Once the kids were safely tucked in bed, Abby and I spent a while on the sofa with the TV off, talking about almost nothing and smiling a lot. Then, I sent her to bed.

I had a screenplay to revise by tomorrow.

EPILOGUE

“You think I’ve forgotten, don’t you?” Abby said. Thirty minutes before New Year’s, we stood together in the living room, and she looked so good I wanted to devour her whole. But then, that’s not unusual.

“Forgotten what?” I said, having to speak loudly. Along with the family, we had our usual December 31st crowd: Leah’s best friend Melissa, her parents Miriam and Richard, and Ethan’s friend from summer camp, Cody, with his parents, Barbara and Milt.

“You know perfectly well.” My wife, when it’s her intention, can be as annoying as the next woman, depending, of course, on who the next woman happens to be. If it’s Kelly Ripa, then she can’t be as annoying. Everything’s relative.

“Okay,” I said. “What?” But she turned away and walked to the living room, where my kids and their friends were indulging in the one holiday tradition I insist upon: watching the Marx Brothers on New Year’s Eve. This year was *Horsefeathers*—a personal favorite.

Lori Shery had called earlier in the day with New Year’s wishes. She still felt it was her fault I’d almost been shot in the head, and no amount of denials would persuade her otherwise. But she was still Lori, and therefore upbeat in a totally unannoying way. I said I still owed her 167 more favors, having evened the scales by only one. Lori, however, said we were even.

Mary Fowler had called the week before. Recovering from the shock that Kevin was going to jail for murder and attempted murder, she said she was concentrating on Justin, who apparently had lost all interest in guns and was now obsessing over superheroes, with an eye toward becoming an illustrator of “graphic novels,” or, as I like to think of them, comic books with a good publicist.

Justin was still working at the sporting goods store, but moved to the fishing and kayaking section. No guns.

Kevin, meanwhile, was held without bail, and the county prosecutor had already announced he would not seek the death penalty, but would recommend life imprisonment without the possibility of parole, which I considered the appropriate form of punishment.

Howard and Andrea had called just before dinner (in fact, while we were preparing dinner, but what else is new?). Things were fine in Minnesota, where they'd already had seven inches of snow. Our weather had warmed up, strangely, and this afternoon, it had actually been in the fifties. So everyone was getting the weather they wanted.

Mahoney, having spent the Christmas holiday with his mother, had decided to forgive her when she promised not to send anyone else to sabotage his work. He introduced her to cell phones, and explained their use in allaying her concerns about his safety. Isobel now knows that Mahoney is never truly stranded on the road, and presumably sleeps better at night. Her son, his status as the Babe Ruth of rental car mechanics restored, probably does, too. By the time I spoke to him, he was up to *Escape from the Planet of the Apes*.

Though I hadn't heard recently from his mother's long-ago boyfriend, I knew Mr. Shapiro was out there somewhere. On the first morning of Chanukah, I had gone out for the newspapers in the morning and found a dozen Sonny Amster bagels on the doorstep.

Big, Bigger, and Biggest were no longer outside the house. But if someone comes after me again with a Glock, I may request their renewed interest.

Lydia Soriano at *Snapdragon* was pleased with my Asperger's angle on the Michael Huston story, and thought she might assign me a more general AS story early in the new year. I was happy with the potential for more work, and with the \$1,500 check for the Huston piece (750 words at \$2 a word).

Karen Huston, charged with hiring Kevin Fowler to kill her husband, was out on bail. Her father had seen to that, and hired a colleague, someone he'd gone to law school with, to defend her. I doubted she'd ever make it to trial. Abby said an incompetence defense was probably going to force a plea bargain at some point. She'd initially thought Karen might try to get immunity by selling out her uncle, but the possibility she knew enough about Shapiro to merit prosecutorial attention was remote, and besides, it was better to go to jail than to get Hyman Shapiro mad at you.

Rezenbach himself faced no charges—he hadn't known about Karen's plans or her hiring of Kevin Fowler. He'd merely supplied money and

connections when she'd asked, and because she was his daughter, he'd asked no questions.

Karen was said never to leave her house, but she hired a boy across the street to walk Dalma after three others turned her down. The poor dog was thought to be unlucky. Dalma loved the boy across the street, and there was speculation that if Karen went to jail, Dalma would find a home not far away.

Leah couldn't stop laughing when Harpo dashed through the streets in a garbage cart pulled by two white horses. If you haven't seen the movie *Horsefeathers*, there's absolutely no way to explain it.

With only a short time before midnight, I recalled that, though we had lit the Chanukah candles after dinner, we hadn't yet given the kids their gifts. We'd decided to make this night the Big Present night because of the "double" holiday (Chanukah and New Year's).

I called the gathering to attention and raised my plastic cup of Diet Coke. "Ladies and gentlemen!" I shouted. "Thank you for coming tonight. It wouldn't be New Year's Eve without you. But tonight, it's also the sixth night of Chanukah, and my children have been waiting a very long time for this."

Abby arrived with two boxes, a small one and a larger one. "For Leah," Abby said, and our daughter ran forward and accepted the smaller box. "Thank you, Mom and Dad," she said, and quickly opened her gift.

"A digital camera!" And the least expensive one there was, too, since we knew she'd destroy it in about two weeks. But Leah is an aspiring photographer, and the film and developing bills were becoming serious enough to merit the change to digital media. It was an equitable trade-off. Leah hugged each of us, especially me, since she knew Abby didn't have a clue how to go about selecting a digital camera.

"This one," Abby said, indicating the larger box, "is for Dad to give." We had disagreed a bit on this, and she had finally given in to my point of view. I took the box and handed it to Ethan.

"Now, it's something that's not on your list," I told him.

"It's not?" He was suspicious. Another "Trouble" game?

But when he opened the box, he was not disappointed. "*PlayStation2!*" he shouted, and there was actually some applause around the back of the room. "Dad!"

“Well,” I said, “I got paid for writing the Michael Huston story, and you helped by solving the murder. You deserved something special for that.”

Ethan, who avoids most physical contact, gave me a bear hug and held it for a long time. Then he asked if he could leave the party to set it up in his room, and I said he had to be back in fifteen minutes for midnight. He said he would.

Just as Abby was bringing out plastic cups filled with champagne, the phone rang. I figured it was my mother, offering New Year’s wishes and a tale or two of supermarket subterfuge at her local Shop Rite. As I took the plastic flute of champagne, my wife said, “I haven’t forgotten.”

“I’m sure you haven’t.” The woman was demented. I picked up the phone.

“Aaron!” said Glenn Waterman. “Happy New Year!”

“Not for another six minutes, Glenn. Or three hours and six minutes, where you are.”

“Well, I’m getting to you early,” he said. “I read the revisions, and you’re a genius.” I didn’t tell him I was a ridiculously fast genius, having revised a 120-page screenplay in five hours. Or that I’d gotten two hours of sleep Christmas night, and then FedEx’ed him the screenplay on the 26th.

“Thanks. Does this mean . . . ?”

“After the first of the year, we’re going to call your agent to work out an option,” Glenn said. “Happy New Year.”

I grinned. “It certainly seems that way.”

After I hung up, Leah, who’d been sent to retrieve her brother, did so, and just in time. We all raised our glasses as Dick Clark and 500,000 of his closest friends counted down the seconds. I had no time to tell Abby about the call.

She sidled over to me with three seconds left. “I didn’t forget!” she shouted over the din, and then it was a new year, and everyone was shouting and kissing.

My wife gave me a kiss that would kill a normal man, and held me so tight I thought we would meld into one big parent—not that I was complaining.

“Happy birthday,” she said. “I never forget.”

“Okay, you remembered. Thanks. So, where’s my present?”

“Later,” she said.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Every word of this book is completely fictional, but there is one real person in it: Lori Shery of ASPEN, Inc., who really was there at the beginning when everyone was wondering what an Asperger was, and we were panicking because a doctor had just said the “autism” word to us for the first time. Every word about her kind, selfless dedication to we Asperger parents is true, and I really would jump on the bandwagon if Lori decided to become the first female Jewish president. She kindly agreed to become a fictional character for my book, and I appreciate it beyond what I can express. Thanks, Lori.

In addition, Sonny Amster’s Bakery in Millburn, The Galloping Hill Inn in Union, and Thomas Sweets Ice Cream in New Brunswick (and Princeton), NJ are real businesses. I sincerely doubt the bakery’s bagels are the favorite of any organized crime figures, but I really have no way of knowing. If you’re in the area, you should definitely check out all these places (and no, I have no business interest in any of them). As for the rest, it’s all made up.

But for all the parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, siblings, friends, and those with AS or high-functioning autism, I hope the depiction of Asperger Syndrome found herein is one that pleases you. Keep fighting the good fight, and maybe the world will understand the differences a little better one day. If you believe, however, that I am making light of the situation, that I don’t think AS is a serious thing, I apologize and beg your forgiveness—nothing could be farther from the truth. But without a sense of humor, we have no perspective, and we can’t be everything we should.

My family approaches Asperger’s with as much humor as we can, and our own Aspie is a source of pride and inspiration beyond our wildest hopes. Sometimes, even his jokes are funny. Should this book be your introduction to Asperger Syndrome, welcome. Please take it in the spirit in which the story is offered—as an entertainment.

If you want to know more, please go to:

<http://www.aspennj.org>

or any of the links at the web site

<http://www.aarontucker.com> for more information.

And when the “weird kid” in your class does something in a way that might not be the way you’d do it, maybe you should think twice.

For this book, thanks to the usual suspects: my wife and family, editor and publisher Bruce Bortz, PJ Nunn, Mindy Starns Clark, Mark D. Terry, Julia Spencer-Fleming, Ross Hugo-Vidal, Jeff Pollitzer, Ian Abrams, Michael Levine, Marcy Gross, and Ann Weston.

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To everyone who has taken the time to email and let me know the books have tickled or touched them, thank you. That is an author’s greatest joy.

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Aaron Tucker and his family and friends were born out of a desire to amuse. If you’ve been entertained by this or the other books in the series, please feel free to let me know at jeff@aarontucker.com.

If, however, you feel you’ve been ripped off by a bogus mystery that doesn’t deliver on its promise, I encourage you to keep your feelings to yourself.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeffrey Cohen is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *USA Weekend*, and many other publications. His screenplays have been developed by Jim Henson Productions, CBS, Gross-Weston Productions, and others. He teaches screenwriting at Drexel University.

His writing on Asperger Syndrome includes one of the first nationally syndicated articles on the subject, in 1999, and two non-fiction books, *The Asperger Parent: How to Raise A Child With Asperger Syndrome and Maintain Your Sense of Humor* and *Guns A' Blazing: The Autism Spectrum and Schools*, both from AAPC Publishing. He occasionally gives keynote speeches at autism-related conferences.

As Dog Is My Witness is his third Aaron Tucker novel, following *For Whom the Minivan Rolls* and *A Farewell to Legs*.

Unlike Aaron Tucker, Cohen is tall, flaxen-haired, and—no one mentioned this was going to run under a photograph. Sorry.

A graduate of Rutgers, Cohen lives with his wife, two children, and dog in New Jersey.